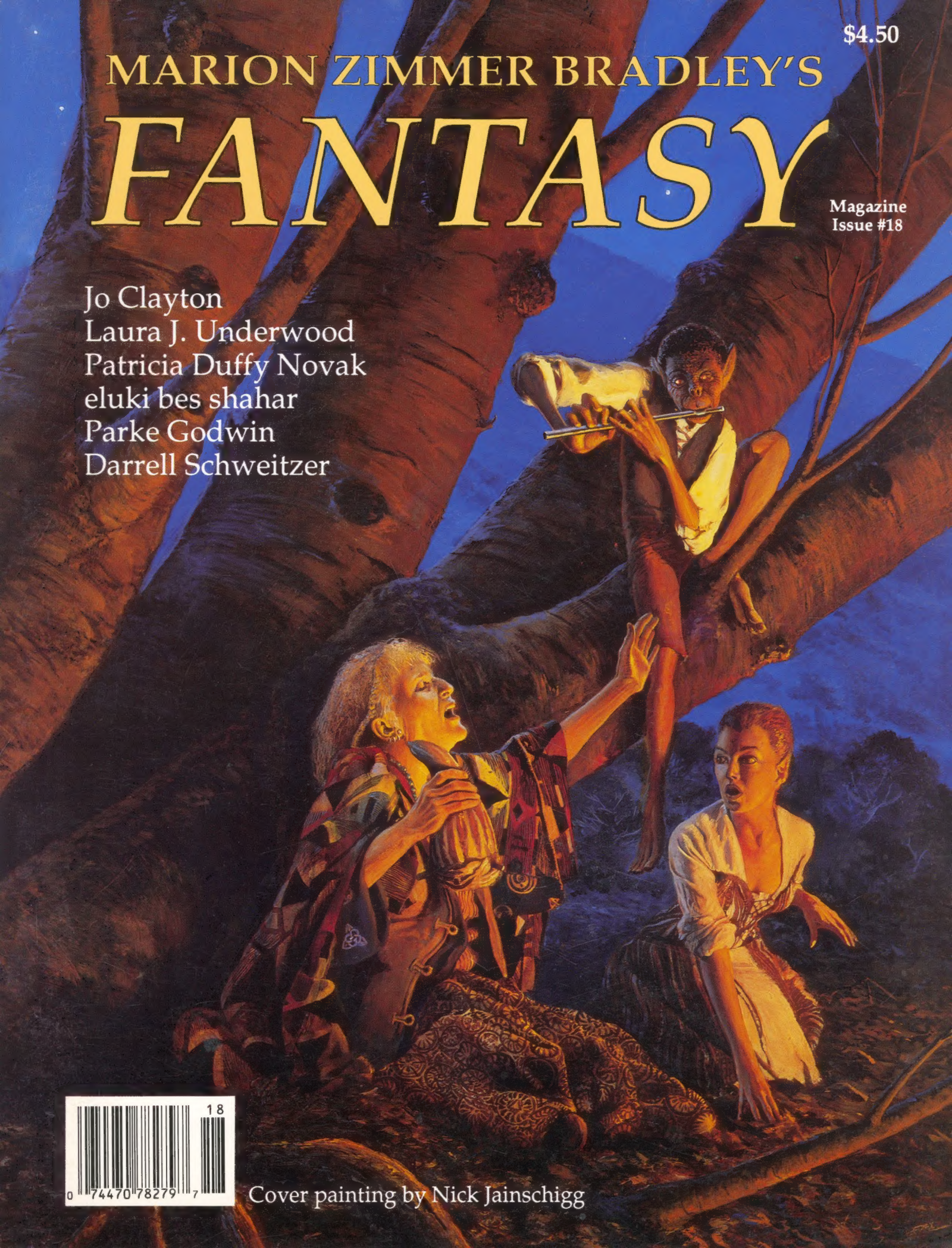
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Issue #18
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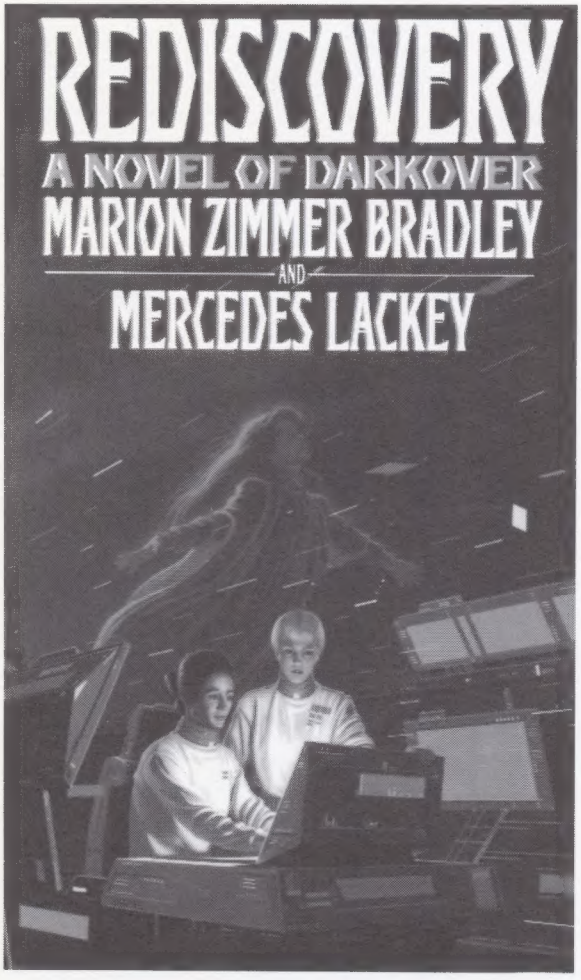


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# MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY

*Magazine*

## I'M NOT IN THIS BUSINESS FOR MY HEALTH, YOU KNOW

I could think of a lot of jobs that would be better for my health than being an editor and publisher, especially in today's economic climate. I would get more exercise as a busperson in an outdoor restaurant, and would be under a lot less stress if I were, say, the Ayatollah of Berkeley. Still, there persists in the minds of many readers, writers, fellow editors, and members of the science fiction/fantasy community, the misimpression that I started this magazine just for fun — or worse, for occupational therapy for my old age.

Now, it's true that I like editing; in fact, I'd rather be doing it than anything else of which I'm currently capable. (OK, I'd rather sing; but my last stroke seems to have made a rather thorough mess of my vocal chords, so I'll just have to wait for the singing till I can take my place in that heavenly choir...) But — and I think it's a pretty important 'but' — if I had wanted only something for my own amusement, I would have started a mimeographed or dittographed "little" magazine, circulated among my friends for a purely token fee, and relying almost entirely on volunteer assistance. Instead, I hired a thoroughgoing professional editor, procured the very best secretarial and bookkeeping help I could locate, bought the latest thing in computers and printers, and put myself to the endless trouble of reading every manuscript that comes in, if its writer makes the slightest effort to submit in professional form.

Of course, being stubborn and opinionated (more a product of temperament than age, I want you to know!), I seldom do anything that conventional wisdom advises. The conventional wisdom is that short fiction, especially fantasy, doesn't sell. Major magazines routinely print a fiction story or two, but they mostly print articles, true life stories/confessions/gossip and reviews of various sorts. And of course, conventional wisdom dictates that if I had any sense at all, I would not have started this magazine in the bottom of what everyone except the President seems to agree is the worst recession the country has seen since the Thirties.

When I first began talking about the possibility of publishing a fantasy magazine, a friend told me the cautionary tale of an individual who tried to start a fiction magazine. The first day's mail brought him two subscriptions and two hundred manuscripts. Some days, *our* mail looks like that. But, as people learn that I'm serious about this (the quality of stories and artwork should speak for itself), our subscription list is gaining steady ground. And that *is* good for my health!

Anyone in publishing will tell you the only way to get national recognition is to use one of the huge magazine distributors. But I hesitate to patronize any organization whose standard practice is to remove the magazines from the newsstands after a few days, letting the dealer tear off the covers, having the magazines pulped, and — if you can believe it — still getting full credit for them. I'd rather do the distribution myself, or use smaller distributors, and keep complete back issues available for readers and collectors. The disadvantage is that the magazine is hard to find at newsstands. (So, subscribe!)

No, I'm not doing this for my health. I'm doing it because I love fantasy, I love editing, I love to find and encourage new writing talent, and I have a firm belief that there's an untapped market out there, recession and all, for the fantasy stories I select and print.

Those of you who currently subscribe — thank you for your support; you give me encouragement to continue to fly in the face of conventional wisdom. Tell your local library about us, or give a subscription to a friend...

If you don't subscribe, give it some serious thought. We're getting better with every issue, and the best is yet to come!

Marion Zimmer Bradley

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

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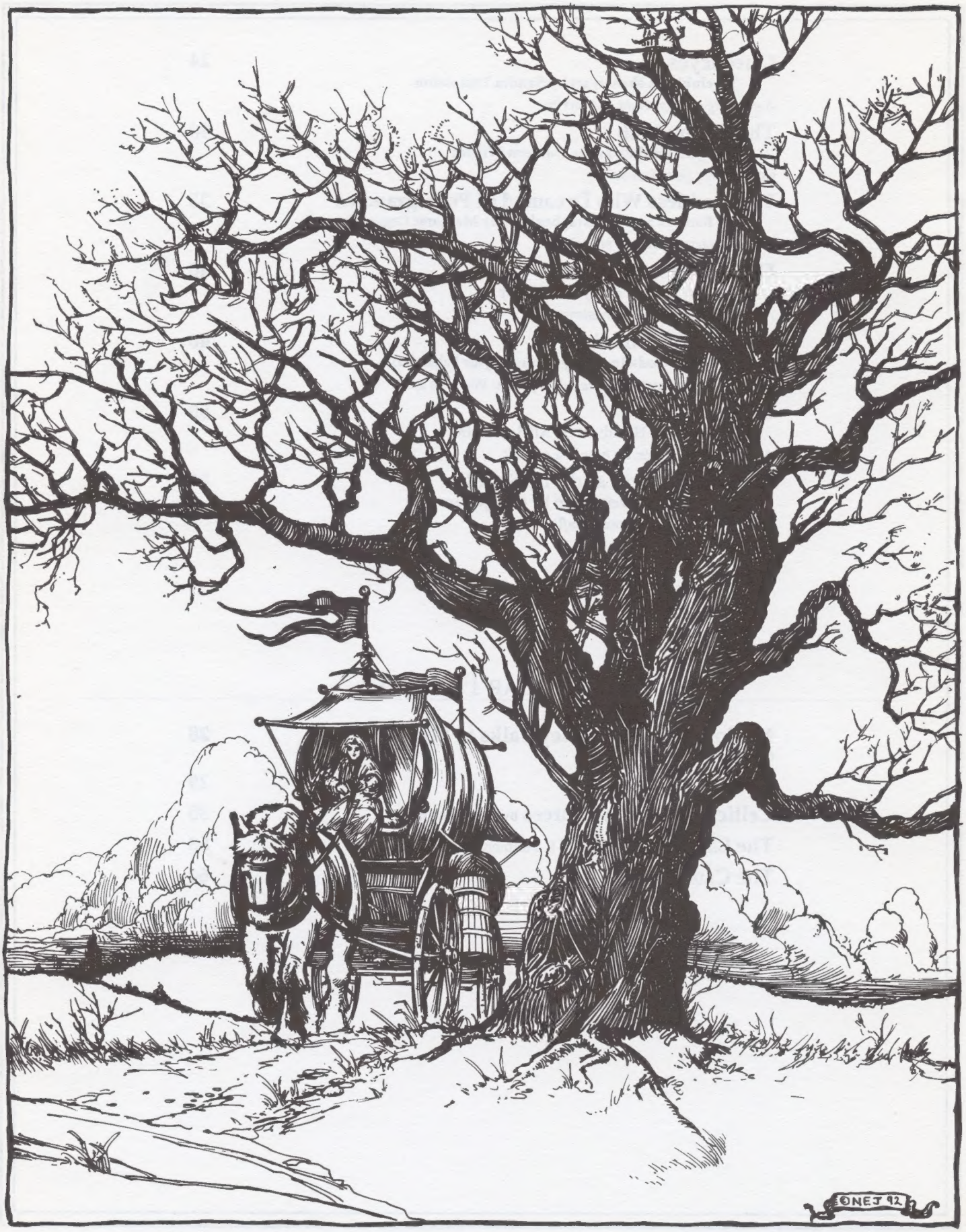


Artwork by Nick Jainschigg

# Arakney's Web

## by Jo Clayton

"Whoa, Dapple, easy now."

The van slowed to a stop in the shadow of a cluster of trees with slender white trunks and sticky, saw-edged leaves, bright green and newly unfolded from the bud. The horse sagged into his harness, shaking his big head, foam spattering the clumps of grass growing around his knees.

Arakney Ko'eem dropped the reins over the curving mudshield, shifted on the lumpy cushion. "I think we've lost them." She started to comb her fingers through the tangled mass of coarse grey hair that fell about her shoulders, but the windknots blocked her. "F'lich!" She turned her head, addressed the canvas curtains that shut off the front of the van. "Piri, find my brush, will you? That's the last time I try a new do in a place I don't know. Hairpins are expensive and I've lost every c'fillacher one."

The Osuni pushed his head through the curtains. "'Kney, you shock me." He grinned at her. "My ears, my poor little ears." He wiggled them and had a lot to wiggle; they were large for his size, with no lobes and pointed tips. "What'd you expect, that last story you told? Lady Fox and the Pig, t' t'. Headman saw he better have a care for his cracklin' before his wives got the idea."

"Pah! He annoyed me." She took the brush from him and attacked the knots.

Piri crawled through and sat beside her. He looked a lot like the peachpit monkeys fathers carve for their children — a peachpit monkey with a strip of tightly curled maroon fleece that went from ear to ear.

He scratched at the inside of his elbow as he watched her divide her hair and begin braiding it. "Marewole Moor. Hunh. Headman's youngest, Michi, what a pest, eh? He and his pack of wigglets, they cornered me night b'fore last and pitched tales at me about the moor. Yankin' my leg, some of it, but some of it, they scared themselves, see it in the gooseflesh, hear it in the whispers."

"So?" Her fingers wove briskly through the thick grey hair. "Can you reach back, get me something to tie this off?"

"Here. I come prepared." He held out his hand, two thin leather thongs dangling over the fingers. "What I think, the Yasroub didn't so much lose us, they turned round and went home, telling each other they'd let the moor take care of us."

Arakney took the thongs, secured her braids and flipped them over her shoulders. "You pick up anything about people living in here? I don't like the look of that storm."

Clouds were piling up in the west and sweeping toward them; the wind was heavy with rain and the strong acrid smell of the heather.

"Witches and werefolk according to the wigglets."

"Whatever they are, they need a roof like anyone else on a rainy day. Get your flute, Piri, see what you can call to us." She stood. "While you're doing that, I'll tend poor Dap, he's had a hard run and earned his grain."

Piri sat crosslegged on the roof of the van, eyes closed, breath coming slow and steady as he prepared himself, then he lifted the heavy silver flute to his lips and began to play, an eerie, scarcely audible melody that flowed out to fill the skybowl and tickle the ears of everything under that bowl.

The girl came trotting around the trees, fought her body to a stop when she saw Arakney standing with her hand on Dapple's neck. Her eyes were the same color as her short rough hair, the brownish red of a fox's coat; her skin was olive, her body supple with youth and something else.

Dapple snorted and shifted uneasily, his head jerking up and down. Arakney soothed him with one hand while she watched the girl. "We mean no harm to you," she said. "We're lost and need shelter from that." She nodded at the clouds boiling toward them. "Tell us where we can find it, then we'll let you go."

Curiosity sparked in the foxy eyes, but the girl shook her head. "This is Marewole Moor, you'll find no shelter here."

"Now, m'dear, it's not nice to lie to your elders."

"I don't lie." Her eyes darting about, her bare feet shifting on the hard earth, the girl was testing out the flute's spell, hunting weak spots and pushing against them.

"By implication, you do. And most cleverly, too. Use that cleverness, child, think on what brought you here. Piri has other tunes he can play."

The girl sniffed, wiggled her nose; she'd managed to gain some play in the mesh that held her and was unobtrusively working herself into the shadow under the trees. "If that's what your word's worth, why should I lead you anywhere?"

Arakney scratched Dapple gently between the eyes; he snorted and nuzzled at her. "I'm a story spinner," she said impatiently, "not a brigand. Look at me, what could I do to harm anyone?"

The girl went still, red-brown eyes opening wide. "Cha-la, you a Spinner, where's your Gourd?" She folded her arms across her narrow chest. "And would you know *The Witch of Hesley Dell*? I've never heard the whole of it and I'd like to."

Arakney laughed. "I've heard a dozen versions, you'll have to sing me yours sometime." She stepped away from Dapple, took her Gourd from its pouch and chanted as she shook it, the soft

shssh-shssh almost lost in the bluster of the wind. "Red was her hair and green her eyes and her soul was black as a grandmama's pot. She loved with a love as true as fire, as strong and as steady as a summer wind." She dropped the Gourd back into its pouch. "And that's all you get without a taste from the pot or the clink of silver."

The girl stopped fighting the spellbond, fears eased by the Gourd's soft shssh and the Spinner's Chantvoice. "How'd you get all the way to here? And why?"

"A slight miscalculation on my part."

"Wrong story?" A nimble brow arching high, a tilt of her head — she was fire and flash now that her wariness had dropped away.

Arakney blinked. "Something like that."

The girl scratched behind an ear. "Him up there, he can rest his lip."

A chatter of her bare feet on the grass, then she darted to the van, flowing up onto the seat with the sure fluidity of youth at its peak, her words streaming back over her shoulder as she moved. "Take too long to try telling you, I'll ride with you, show you the way. Cha-la, shift it, Spinner, the dark's coming fast." Before the last word was out, she was sitting on the worn cushions frowning impatiently at Arakney.

Artwork by Nick Jainschigg

Dapple ambled through heather shadows and the slanting sunrays that escaped the thickening clouds, the van rattling behind him, lurching across the uneven earth as he followed the elk trace their guide pointed out.

Arakney clucked encouragement to Dapple, then turned to the girl. "Arakney Ko'eem. You?"

"Yohn. The chook where I live is called Raevlis." She spoke in quick broken phrases, fitting them between the jolts. "It's where I'm taking you. Turn now, this way." She pointed, then shifted the direction of her finger. "You see that nice flat green spot up there? Pretty, isn't it? Drive on that and you won't stop sinking till you bounce off Fadda Ameeser's head. Go straight till the siltong grove, there, that dark green lump, you can just see it in the light that's left. You'll go north from there till you reach a tor, it's a short fat one, doesn't show from here, that's where Raevlis is, tucked into a bend of the Tal-pikang."

"A river? Ah, that's good, it'll give us a way to go when it's time to go. You're young to be out alone."

Yohn flounced indignantly on the lumpy cushion. "I made marriageable my last birthday."

"So?"

She giggled, an infectious gurgling sound that tickled Arakney's ears. "Visitations. The Holy Places."

"Oh?"

"Don't girls do that where you come from? Where are you from anyway, Arakney Ko'eem? If it's not rude to ask."

"Not rude, but it's a question that's a bit difficult to answer. Tell me about this Visitation thing. This is a new piece of the world to me, I'll need new stories to fit it."

Yohn grinned. "Make one of me, eh? Cha-la, I run the heather, dance in the moonlight, sleep a while and travel on, tokens in my pouch, one two three. See this?" She brought out a small glass vial with a wax stopper; it waved with the lurching of the van and glittered in the distant lightning.

"Ah."

"It's for water from Kinayom's Well." She tucked the vial away again, missing the pouch the first time as a wheel dropped into a hole and wobbled out again. "That's the spring atop Gratcher Tor where Kinayom flew the first time. They say when you sleep there, if you get the charm right, you'll dream your lover's face. Or at least a sign that'll show you who he is when he comes."

Arakney nodded. "Adrina's Dream is a tale like that. Have you heard that one?"

"Nay. You'll sing it for us, huh?"

"We'll see, we'll see."

Yohn squeezed her mobile face into a comic grimace, then sat with her hands dangling between her knees, her body swaying with the shift of the seat. "The second Place is the Granddaddy Ayyanga on Poryo Tor, you ever seen an ayyanga tree?"

"Nay. Not by that name, at least."

"Cha-la, you'd know it if you had. It's bigger than some chooks, with trunks all round like sentinels, each year a new ring of them. There's this bug that lives in its top branches and galls grow round it that have the most wonnnnderful smell. You're supposed to cut one of them loose and wrap it tight so the scent stays in. That's for putting in with clothes and keeping your homefast strong."

The wind was getting louder and stronger; Arakney raised her voice so she could be heard above it. "That one I must admit is new. There's a story for each of these places?"

"Yah sure."

"I'd like to hear them before I move on, unless it's something you don't tell outsiders."

"Oh nay. The last's the Bower. On Journister Tor. Sarang the Bearman planted alda vines there and tended them seven years to 'tice his love to him and teach her the heart of life. You chew one of the leaves and sit in vigil and sometime during the night, a thing comes to you and it's your secret thing. You don't ever tell that, not even to your dearest love. But Sarang's story's no secret, everyone knows it."

"I see."

"When a girl can show water, gall, and leaf, then the old ones know she's fit for wiving. 'S what I meant to do, but I can start again another day...." She grinned. "When I can sleep dry not soggy nor snuffling."

Half an hour later darkness plunged down on them as if the blustery stormwinds had blown out the sun. Yohn ran ahead of Dapple, foxfire glimmering about her head and shoulders as she led them through the dangers of the night.

Piri clung to the back of the driver's seat and watched the girl's long easy stride as she loped into the whirling darkness. "Were," he yelled in Arakney's ear. "You sure you want to do this?"

"If that youngster's a sample," she yelled back, wind whipping the words from her mouth almost before they formed, "her folk like stories. I can work with that."

Two small dark forms came swooping from the darkness; they slowed, blurred into small boys who trotted beside Yohn, talking to her in low rapid voices.

A moment later, she ran back to the van, swung up, and plopped onto the cushion beside Arakney. "You better stop," she said.

"Trouble? Whoa, Dapple, whoa boy."

"Oggeri in the chook." A jag of lightning showed Yohn with her fingers laced together, squeezed them until the bones showed white; her ears were laid back and her hair stood out in a stiff halo. "Swal said it was a whole swarm of 'em. Him and Hersty they're cousins of mine so when they saw me, they came out the heather to give me word." Her eyes darted about, whites gleaming. "I don't know what to do..."

Arakney took Yohn's straining hands, eased them apart, held them between her own. "Quiet now, you're a clever one, so use it." She smiled as more lightning showed the rigidity melting from the girl. "First, who or what are Oggeri?"

Yohn blinked. "They mostly live in the desert on t'other side the moor, but ever now and then a bunch take a notion and swarm the moor, eating their way 'cross."

"Eating?" She moved her head close to Yohn's so she could hear and see a little of the girl's face.

"Uh huh." Yohn's face was pinched, her eyes ringed with white. "Swal says they sneaked up when it started getting dark and..." She broke off, eyes squinting, mouth twisted as she fought back tears.

"Swarm. How many would that be?"

Yohn took a deep breath, pulled her hands loose. "Swal says more of them than us, he din't stay to count."

"So?"

"I dunno. Maybe five hands of them."

"How did they manage to sneak up on a were-settlement?"

"I don't understand..."

"Don't be silly, child. You needn't try to deny the obvious." She brushed at wisps of hair that escaped the braids and blew about her face, irritating her. "If I'm going to help you..."

Yohn's tongue flicked across her lips. "Are you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I can." *Because, silly child, I'd rather have friends at my back than foes or indifference.* "So, how did they manage to surprise your folk?"

Yohn turned her head. "Swal, come here a minute. 'S all right. Come on."

The clot of darkness that was Swal muttered to his cousin, then came sidling closer, hugging the clumps of heather until he was beside the van, looking up at Yohn. The flickering lightning showed Arakney a dark boy with huge brown eyes and rough brown hair clipped close to his head, curly brown fur on the backs of his hands. "What?"

"Wasn't it Chrang's watch? How'd they get past without him blowing the horn?"

Swal shrugged. "Dunno, 'twas no differnt than always getting on for supper, you know, then there was Oggeris everywhere, two three of 'em for each chup, they jump up so fast seems like no one could turn, you know, 'cept Komchin, he shook 'em off an' went bear an' bust the Suryo loose long enough to reach horn, like I said, and then tads and we was running off so fast I din't see what else happened." He started as the other boy sidled up and brushed against him. "Hersty?"

Hersty was wee and sleek as a silver cat with eyes that glittered like polished pewter in the unsteady flashes. He pointed at Arakney. "Who she?"

Arakney leaned around Yohn. "I spin a tale or two and sing a song if folk sit still to listen. What do they look like, these Oggeri?"

"Din't see them up close," Swal said.

Hersty shook his head, his long white hair flying out above his limber, pointed ears.

"Flappy things," Swal said. "Taller'n Komchin by more'n a head."

"And they stink. Oooo phah!" Hersty pinched his nose.

"It was like they was laying on the ground and come flying up in your face," Swal said. "You know, like leaves."

"An' their hands're bones," Hersty said. "An' they rattle when they walk."

Arakney felt Piri's hand tightened on her shoulder; she didn't look at him. Ancient enemies, from another place another time. *I thought we'd seen the last of them.* Her stomach knotted as she remembered her arrogant words. *Because I can. Cha-la, as the child said, that's true enough. Because I will, that's truer yet. None of their business, though. Let's get on with it.* "Yohn, that tor you were talking about, can you climb up the backside of it, I mean without being seen from your chook?"

"Cha-la, a baby could do it." Yohn twisted round. "Swal, you and Hersty go in front and lead us, huh?" As the boys went trotting away, she leaned back, sighed. "Tads like them run the heather a lot, practicing their turns, you know. They'll remember it better than me."

"Whoa, Dap, whoa boy." Arakney wiped the spatter of raindrops from her face and scowled up at the huge rustling blotch atop the tor. "Can we get through that?"

Yohn's full lips twitched into a brief smile but there was none in her eyes. "It's only a baby ayyanga. It'll be easy enough to get to the other side, nothing grows under an ayyanga."

"Only a baby, hm?" Arakney shook her head. She swung down from the seat and began unclipping the harness from the van. While she worked, she talked. "Yohn, tell your cousins to take Dapple

into the heather and stay with him till this is over. There's a possibility that things will go wrong for us and I don't want him hurt. I'm fond of him. He's a good horse, old Dap." She patted his flank as she moved along him, stripping the harness off him. More raindrops slanted into her, intermittent and separate still, the outriders on the storm.

Arakney eased through the last rank of secondary trunks, the newest ones, limber and pale with a tender bark that bled at a touch. Overhead the ayyanga's long, blade-shaped leaves rattled in the wind, and bits of papery bark broke loose. She settled crosslegged on the lip of a cliff that fell straight down to the chook which was a scattering of long, narrow stone houses intermittently visible in the shifting light from the roughly circular common outlined by the bonfires that burned around a pit where something was being roasted over a bed of coals. She heard a hissing intake of breath behind her as Yohn saw that. "Quiet," she murmured. She'd thought about telling the girl to stay behind with her cousins, but didn't waste her breath trying it. "Sit down and be patient. If we rush at this, we'll just get everyone killed."

Flat black forms hurried in and out of the firelight, tearing thatch from roofs and building a shelter over the pit. The wind teased at the fires, whipping bits of burning wood at the houses. The stone wouldn't burn, but here and there thatching started to smoke; the Oggeri ignored it and continued with preparations for the feast.

Arakney took the Gourd from its pouch, held it in her lap. Piri was close beside her, sitting in the next gap between the secondary trunks, his nightsight turning his eyes to yellow fire. "Do you see any of the Were?"

"Nay, 'Kney, but there's...mmm...I can see about five of the Oggeri hanging about the biggest house. Guards, you think?"

"Could be. Yohn?"

"That's the Suryo's Chup." The girl's voice was wire taut. "It's meant to be a safe place, so I s'pose it's easiest to guard."

Arakney ran her thumb over the waxy, pimpled surface of the Gourd. "Yohn," she said. "Listen, this is important. Don't distract us. You hear? You must be quiet and sit still."

"Yes. I understand."

"If you can't do that, best you go join your cousins."

"I said I understand." Quiet as drifting thistledown the girl moved round behind Piri and settled herself beside him, crosslegged, hands on thighs.

Arakney looked at Piri, nodded, lifted the Gourd and began shaking it gently, shsssh shsssh sh shsssh. When she sang, it was in the Old Tongue, words that belonged to days before Yohn's first ancestor saw light, and her voice was a whisper sliding on the wind.

Patches of thready mist formed on the black water of the slow-flowing river, formed and drifted toward the fires. Piri's long breaths were heavy in her ears, then the sound from the flute lifted her chant.

The fog merged with the rain, pulling the silver lines of falling water into itself, weaving a web as delicate as smoke and stronger than steel, anchored by the flutesong's cable.

It passed through the scattered houses, catching Oggeri as it tightened, driving them closer and closer together until they were a clump of black leaves fluttering in the chup's common mead, rustling about the fire....

She sang a double note into the chant and the fire exploded.

The Oggeri burned.

Three days later when Arakney clucked to Dapple and started him from Raevlis on the River, Swal and Hersty led a pack of youngers dancing around her, giving her a send-off with the charm she'd crafted for them to help them fight off the next wave of Oggeri that were bound to come this way. She looked around, but didn't see Yohn among them. *Gone back to her own affairs, no doubt.* She sighed, a little hurt; she'd grown fond of the girl. "That's the way the world whimpers," she murmured to herself and listened to the children singing their charm.

"Shillilly shallilly," they chanted.

Shillilly shallilly
sing we of Oggeri
Kaniem o kickanem
how do we break them
hammer their toes
pull on their nose
chew on their fingerbones
laugh at their moans
Shillilly shallilly
sing we of Oggeri
Sik tay surral tay tay u curral
Hajina waven sassina paven
Efta ta KOKE! Mista ka YOKE!
Shillilly shallilly
Sing we of Oggeri
Poor little beasties gone up in smoke.

The sound of the children's voices followed them until they rounded a low tor smothered in ayyanga trunks.

A red fox came scrambling down the slope to trot beside Dapple, yellow eyes laughing as she looked over her shoulder — as if to say, you thought I'd forgot, didn't you?

"Yohn! Get up here."

The fox looked back again, flicked her ears, and after that ignored all noise from the van.

Piri chuckled. "Looks like we've got us a new companion." He took out his flute and played a travel song as the van creaked deeper into the Moor.

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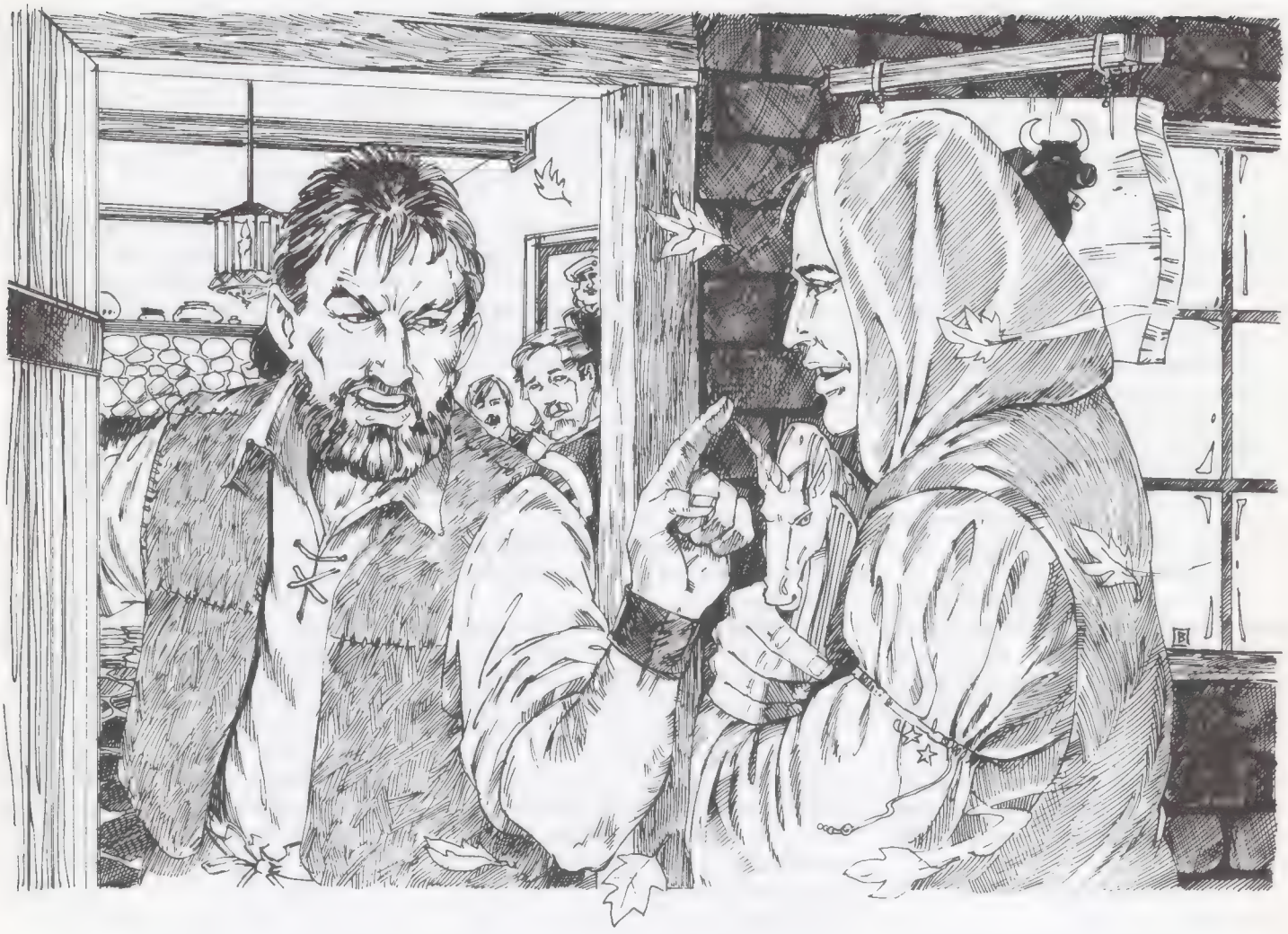
Jo Clayton lives in Portland, Oregon, with her two cats and has been writing professionally for fifteen years. She is currently working on a fantasy trilogy set in her "MoonGather" world.

Nick Jainschigg lives in New York City (but may soon move elsewhere so his wife Monica can pursue her career) and has done covers for sf magazines and books. He particularly enjoys doing fantasy artwork.



Artwork by James Balkovek

# The Black Tower

The icy wind knifed through the village street and whipped about the silhouette of a lone, black tower that rose against the last glow of the sun. Anwyn Baldomyre shivered and clutched the folds of his woolen cloak about his slender shoulders, cradling his harp in his arms. The streets of the village looked deserted for such an early hour. At least, the inn with its crooked sign painted with the figure of a black cow exuded friendly lights and sounds. Anwyn hurried toward the entrance, cowl pulled forward to shadow the young Thuathyn's smooth, eldritch face. He reached for the handle and found the door already bolted.

*Why?* With a sigh, Anwyn looked for a bell pull and, finding none, he beat his fist against the wood. *The things I do for you, Rhystar!* he thought. The mage was probably seated before his fire, enjoying a warm cup of some favorite herbal brew. Guilt filled Anwyn. Rhystar could not leave Far Reach. He was ancient, and the castle there was his refuge against a hostile world. *He has done much for me, and I have no right to refuse him.* Anwyn pounded on the wood again, making his knock more determined with each stroke of his fist.

By the time he heard the bolt sliding back, his teeth were chattering from the cold. A bar was lifted, and the door opened just a crack. A ruddy human face sporting a beard blocked the light, squinting at Anwyn as though he were some unwanted vermin.

*by Laura J. Underwood*

"What do you want?" The voice sounded gruff to hide a tremor of ill ease.

"Just a warm room for the night and a meal by your fire, sir," Anwyn replied.

"Who sent ye, lad?"

"No one, sir. I'm only passing through and seeking shelter for the night."

Anwyn could hear the voices beyond the door lose their cheer to silence.

The human turned and cast a long look at those within, then his gaze drifted back to Anwyn. "From whence do you come, stranger?" he asked.

"Nymbaria," Anwyn replied, hoping the man would soon open the door and let him enter. The wind whipped under his cloak, icy and raw, a teasing hand.

Someone inside whispered something. The human nodded and stepped back. "Come in quickly, lad," he said. "I'm not such a fool as to refuse a Thuathyn shelter on a night as cold as this."

"Thank you, sir," Anwyn said, trying not to show his disappointment at being identified. Thuathyn lived six or seven times the span of humans, and that, as much as the eldritch look of Anwyn's folk, had caused the distrusts and beliefs of long ago to linger. He stepped inside and welcomed the warmth that enveloped him. Cozy smells of ale and food and pine cones on the fire assailed his senses.

"I'm Gordon, master of this inn," the man said. "And you?"

"Anwyn Baldomyre," the minstrel answered.

"Where are ye headed, master Baldomyre?"

"Eryn," Anwyn replied.

"King's business?"

"Nay, sir," Anwyn said with a shy smile. "I am merely delivering a message for a friend."

The landlord grunted, seeming satisfied that he had fulfilled the rules of propriety and made small talk. He busied himself closing the door, quickly glancing outside before he threw the bolt and dropping the bar into place. "Make yourself at home, sir," he said. "I'll fetch the girl."

Anwyn nodded, looking about the tavern occupied by a small number of men. He pushed his hood back just far enough to expose his face to their scrutiny and crossed to the hearth. Gently laying his harp aside, he turned to the blaze, letting the heat sink into his bones. The harp's golden strings gave a faint hum. Anwyn felt a tingling of the senses.

"This is not a cheerful place," the voice of Glynnanis whispered musically to Anwyn's mind. He turned to glance at the unicorn head of the white harp. It was stiff and upright, perfectly motionless: the best precaution in a place such as this. Most humans distrusted Thuathyn magic as much as his own folk did. It would be wiser not to let them know his precious harp was alive.

"Can I get ye something, sir?" The sweet voice startled Anwyn. He turned and found himself meeting such an innocent gaze, dark sparrow's eyes set in a childlike face. Though he had never been tall, she was just the right height to peer up into Anwyn's hood and see the silver of his eyes. Her brows rose in wonder rather than in fear to see the strange color.

"Are ye magister, sir?" she asked, keeping the question to a whisper.

Anwyn was quick to shake his head, loosening tendrils of his coppery hair. "No," he said.

It was the eyes, he knew. They marked him as one born with a potential for power. Anwyn could have been a great mage. Rhystar often said so, but Anwyn was not willing to make the sacrifice that would release his potential for a life of sorcery. His refusal was a trial to his mentor, and Rhystar often threw up his hands in dismay. It was he who had created the harp Glynnanis for a former lover, and given the harp to Anwyn to replace his own when the youth stumbled innocently into the elderly mage's peaceful life. And it was Rhystar who had taught Anwyn the songs of sorcery. Anwyn could work magic with those songs. All they required was his pure tenor voice, and a strong will to manipulate them through the power dormant in him. Any of the mage-born could use simple cantrips without making the sacrifice.

"Have ye a name, sir?" she asked, breaking his thoughts.

"Anwyn Baldomyre," he blurted.

"I'm Mercy," she said, and offered her prettiest smile. "Now, what can I fetch ye, sir?"

Anwyn lowered his gaze. "Hot tea will be fine, and whatever warm food is available."

"Fresh bread and stew," she said and curtsied before turning away in a flounce of linen, wool, and loam-colored curls. Anwyn lowered himself into a seat by the fire. He felt the stares of the occupants as much as he saw them. Nervously, he took up Glynnanis, pressing the sound box of the harp to his chest and stroking the golden strings. I am a minstrel, he thought. They expect to be entertained. A lilting melody escaped from under his skillful fingers, something intended to ease his own fear. The song seemed to work on others as well. Voices began to mutter and chortle, filling the air with friendly sounds.

Until the first shrill noise slashed the air, a banshee's howl carried on the wind. Anwyn stopped his song, startled by the breaking of crockery. He looked up to see Mercy covering her mouth in dismay. Tea and stew were scattered at her feet.

"Mercy!" shouted the landlord. The girl stooped to gather the broken crockery and sop up the mess. Then a second wail broke the silence. Anwyn clutched Glynnanis close, casting a furtive glance at the pale faces of those sitting about the tavern.

"Sunset," someone whispered. "She comes!"

*Who comes?* Anwyn felt a blanket of fear descending over the occupants of the tavern. Mercy's hands shook as she finished gathering her mess and bolted back into the kitchen. The landlord took off his apron and stared at the door. Mercy returned, moving among the tables with a bundle of rags. She laid them before the occupants, finally stopping in front of Anwyn. He watched as the men began stuffing bits of cloth into their ears. Even Gordon followed the actions of the crowd. Mercy thrust two tatters of old linen toward Anwyn.

"Here," she said. "Put these in your ears, and you will be safe."

"Safe from what?" Anwyn ventured.

Mercy stared at him, eyes wide. "Her song of death!"

"Whose song?"

"The succubus!" Mercy cried. "She who abides in the black tower! She uses her song to lure men to their deaths!"

Anwyn made a face. The song itself was death enough to his ears. Mercy was held forth the cloth, shaking it at him. "Please," she said.

"Mercy, the song she sings does not make me want to go to her," Anwyn said. "If anything, it would tempt me to run away!"

Mercy stared at him, uncertain. "How can that be? Men hear the song as a sweet melody that arouses their ardor. Then, they must go to her, and she drains them of their life's essence. They cannot fight her — cannot resist her song!"

Anwyn frowned. "I am a minstrel," he said. "I can resist any song that does not please me." Even as he spoke, a man was rising from his seat, a young farmer by

the look of him. His eyes took on a glassy stare, and he started for the door as though entranced by the terrible sound.

"Joseph, no!" It was Gordon who shouted at the young man, but the farmer paid no heed. Others rose about him, seizing him before he could reach the door. Joseph struggled in their grasp.

"Let me go to her!" he cried, bucking fiercely against their hands. The madness was on him, and he tore free, lurching for the door.

"Anwyn, sing as loud as you can!" It was Glynnanis who called to the minstrel. Anwyn raised the harp and stroked the strings, opening his mouth. He began a merry song about a tavern wench, one he learned from his father when his mother wasn't around to object to the bawdy ballad. Anwyn's tenor swelled, filling the room with his voice, drowning out the terrible keening he perceived from the village streets. The farmer ceased his struggles, turning to face Anwyn. Amusement flooded the human's face, splitting it with a wide grin. He started laughing out loud, doubling over.

Outside, the keening faded as though the owner of the dreaded voice had moved away. When the sound had died, Anwyn ceased his own song. Joseph sank to his knees and started to weep.

Anwyn was suddenly surrounded, men cuffing his shoulders and tugging his sleeves. A rabble of grateful voices filled his ears, all shouting to be heard, and in their midst, he saw the look of admiration on Mercy's face. She slipped through the crowd, reaching his side. His hood had fallen back now, and the men could see his silver eyes, yet they seemed unafraid. He had saved them from the dreaded fiend. All that mattered to them was being able to return to their homes that night. Then Mercy slipped her arm through his, forcing him to clutch Glynnanis under the other. The gleam in the lass's eyes bespoke a longing. Anwyn heaved a sigh, knowing it was a longing he could not fulfill.

They gave Anwyn the best room in the inn — free of charge — and begged him to tell them if he needed anything. He nodded so much, he thought his head would fall off before he managed to close the door between himself and his grateful host. Alone in a large chamber with a warm fire and a huge bed, Anwyn threw off his cloak and dropped his pack. He sank to the floor before the hearth, draping one arm across the top of Glynnanis

Artwork by James Balkovek

at his side, as though the harp were a faithful hound.

"What shall I do?" he whispered. The harp turned its head, gazing up at him from gems of sapphire.

"What do you wish to do?" Glynnanis asked, the musical voice humming within his head.

"I don't know," Anwyn said, drawing his knees to his chin and staring at the fire. He heaved a sigh. "These good people are in trouble. I just wish I knew some way to help them."

"To do that, you would have to destroy the succubus," Glynnanis offered.

Anwyn shifted his silver gaze to the harp. "How does one destroy a succubus?" he asked.

Glynnanis turned its head away to stare at the fire, avoiding his gaze. "Were you a sorcerer, you would know this."

Anwyn studied the hearth under lowered lashes of copper. The fingers of his free hand traced the outline of a warm brick. "I was not meant to be a mage. I am a harper — a minstrel. I love that above all else."

"Above Rhystar?"

Anwyn closed his eyes. Once, he had loved another, but that other chose to give love elsewhere. Broken hearts were not easy to mend. Rhystar changed all that, teaching Anwyn to accept what was in himself, and for that he loved the magister.

"Will you not tell me how to destroy the succubus?" Anwyn said, opening his eyes. "The Song of Fire? The Song of Breaking?"

"Breaking, yes," Glynnanis said, "but not fire. It is part of her nature."

"The Song of Water?"

"Ice," Glynnanis said.

Anwyn furrowed his brow. The Song of Ice would freeze her, but if her nature was fire, would she not break free?

"Ice, then the Song of Breaking," Glynnanis said. "Freeze her, then shatter her quick before she has a chance to burn free."

He started to reply, interrupted by a gentle rap on the door. Too late, he realized the bolt was not thrown, and the door fell open. Glynnanis stiffened as Mercy slipped through the gap, closed the door, and leaned against it. Her linen underdress folded softly around her small body. As Anwyn looked at her, he could believe men would kill for her favor. He offered a smile.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"Master Gordon sent me to make sure everything was to your liking," she replied.

"Everything is fine," Anwyn assured her. "This is a grand room."

"I thought you would like it," she said. "I cleaned it myself. I even made the bed for you and used fresh linens."

"I appreciate that," Anwyn said. "Thank you."

She hesitated, shuffling one toe against the wooden floor. Dark eyes gleamed in the firelight. "Is there anything else I can do for you? Anything?"

Anwyn shook his head. He could see the disappointment in her gaze. "I require nothing of you, Mercy."

She swallowed, glancing at the floor. "Is...is it because I'm human and you're Thuathyn?" she whispered.

Anwyn sighed. "No, Mercy," he said as gently as he could. "That is not the reason."

"You love another, then?"

"Yes," he said, a wan smile dressing his lips.

"I understand. She's very lucky to have one so handsome and faithful, Anwyn Baldomyre." Mercy turned and opened the door, leaving the room with her head lowered. Anwyn sighed again and turned back to the fire.

How could he tell her the truth about his love? She would never understand.

The cold of morning was different from the chill of night. Anwyn muffled himself against the wind and started up the center of the village. The black tower now stood in the morning light like some angry finger jabbing the sky. He stopped at the crumbling stone wall around it, clutching Glynnanis under one arm.

The owner of the tower was not concerned with appearances. Anwyn searched and found an open gate. Thick shadows loomed within the yard. He peered through the opening, cowardice nagging at the back of his senses. He had never really been brave. *Just a fool*, he mused. As near youngest of ten and youngest son of those siblings, there had always been others to protect him from harm, and he had once been content to stay at Nymbaria Hold with his father and mother long after the others were grown and gone. Now, he found it hard to stay in Nymbaria, even if he was the High Lord's minstrel. Nymbaria reminded him of too many personal pains. Rhystar's castle at Far Reach was the only place Anwyn felt comfortable anymore.

"You cannot help these people if you stand out here and brood away the day," the musical voice chided in his head.

Anwyn cast the harp a sour glance, even though Glynnanis spoke the truth. Squaring his shoulders, the young minstrel stepped across the threshold and entered the courtyard.

The wind did not reach inside these walls. Instead, a cloying dampness hung in the air, carrying the scents of an ancient tomb. Shivering at the impression of wispy fingers gently brushing the nape of his neck, he drew his cowl over his head and approached the base of the tower. Rubble littered the stairs leading up to an open doorway.

Anwyn paused before the opening, the hesitation numbing his limbs with fear.

"Go on," Glynnanis whispered. "She sleeps. It is safe enough."

"How do you know this?" he asked, his own voice echoing inside the tower of stone.

"She fed last night. She will sleep until the need come on her again."

"When will that be?"

"When the sun sets once more."

Anwyn nodded. That should give him enough time to familiarize himself with these surroundings. "No servants?" he asked.

"I sense none."

Reassuring, he decided. At least there would be no chance of him being stopped. Yet, if there was no one to guard her when she slept, he couldn't help wondering why the villagers had not tried to destroy her in her sleep.

"Even in sleep, she is dangerous," Glynnanis whispered to his mind. "Her nest is enclosed in magical wards...traps, if you will."

So much for slipping in and freezing her while she slept. He would keep that in mind. Carefully, he searched until he found a torch in one of the wall mounts. He softly hummed the Song of Fire, smiling when the torch burst into flames. He would not be able to use that spell again until he rested, but he saw no reason to worry. The spell would have been useless against the succubus if fire was part of her nature.

It took all of the morning and most of the afternoon to explore the tower. No sign of life could be found anywhere, not even a rat or a spider. Glynnanis gave warning when Anwyn started to search the lower levels below ground. The succubus was nesting in the cellars, and Anwyn declined to enter those regions. Instead, he returned to the main hall of the tower, a large room with a fireplace,

and used his torch to set flame to dry wood resting within the hearth. From his pack, he took the bread and cheese Mercy had insisted on giving him when he spoke of exploring the keep and seeing if there was a way to destroy its denizen. The lass looked appalled when he mentioned the matter over breakfast. Gordon had shaken his head in dismay. Both of them told him that others had gone to the ruins, never to return.

Sitting before the fire, Anwyn fed on the bread and the cheese. The high windows gave his only indication of the passage of time. He watched shafts of sunlight creep across the wall and slowly fade away. A wind whistled through those gaps, hollow mourning in a wicked place. His fear returned with the growing dusk. Anwyn took up his harp, cradling it close, gently stroking the golden strings. He plucked a sweet song to take away his unease, for all the good it did. His stomach was a house for butterflies, and cold anxiety knotted his bowels.

A movement alerted him. A shadow shifted, gliding along the wall. Anwyn forced himself to continue playing, though he strained his ears for any unusual sound. Something like a wistful sigh broke the silence outside his music. He ceased to play and lifted his eyes towards the shadows filling the archway.

Out of the darkness moved a wisp of grey cloud, floating over the floor, hovering like fog. Translucent at first, the creature slowly grew solid enough for Anwyn to distinguish features.

She was lovely, frail and sensual. Anwyn frowned. There was a continual shifting of features where the creature's face should have been. Dark eyes studied him. A smile spread across the lips.

"What have we here?" she said, her voice an ugly rasp.

Anwyn took a deep breath and began to play his harp ever so softly. "Good evening, mistress," he said, fighting to keep the quaver out of his voice.

"What a sweet child you are, to come and give yourself to me," she said.

"Nay, mistress, I have not come for that," Anwyn said, cocking his head so she could see his face more clearly.

The creature squinted, then frowned.

"Mageborn," she said. "How interesting. I have never known a sorcerer to come willingly to me unless he is a fool. Most magister prefer life to my caress."

"I'm not a sorcerer," Anwyn said. "I am a minstrel."

Her eyebrows arched in amusement. She was slipping closer.

Anwyn could see the lithe body through a drapery of black that floated about her. It shifted and reshaped itself as though searching for some form he would desire.

"A minstrel," she mused. "So you have come to try and sing to me?"

"I have come to destroy you, creature!" he said, allowing his voice to harden with anger.

Her laughter reminded him of a crow. The sound bounced off the walls and ceiling, surrounding him. When she stopped, she was glaring at him.

"You are a fool!" she said. "No man can resist my song! Or do you think because you are Thuathyn, you will have some advantage? If so, you are wrong, my handsome youth. I have fed on as many Thuathyn as I have humans. Their essence is sweeter by far. Come to me, minstrel. Let us not delay your ecstatic death in my arms. You will enjoy it as all men do. Come!"

She floated closer, extending arms, hands beckoning for him to slip into her embrace. Her full lips parted, and the song swelled, dissonant notes that bothered his ears. Anwyn grimaced, but met her gaze, rising to stand on the hearth with harp in hand. Closer she came, lust and hunger burning in dark eyes. She was searching for an image to tempt him with her song. He could feel her probing his mind, static piercing his head. Anwyn allowed one image alone to go forth — Mercy — and the creature shifted until she took on the young girl's shape. Bright eyes like a sparrow peered into his. Small hands reached for him, gently plucking his tunic.

"Stop that!" he snapped, and struck the hands away, letting his anger swell. The creature drew back with a start. Rage contorted her features into those of a cadaverous hag. Her lips parted in a snarl, revealing fangs. With a gasp, Anwyn stumbled away, clutching Glynnanis before him like a shield. The eyes that glared at him now were burning coals.

"So, you are not as other men, minstrel! You are able to resist a woman's charms,

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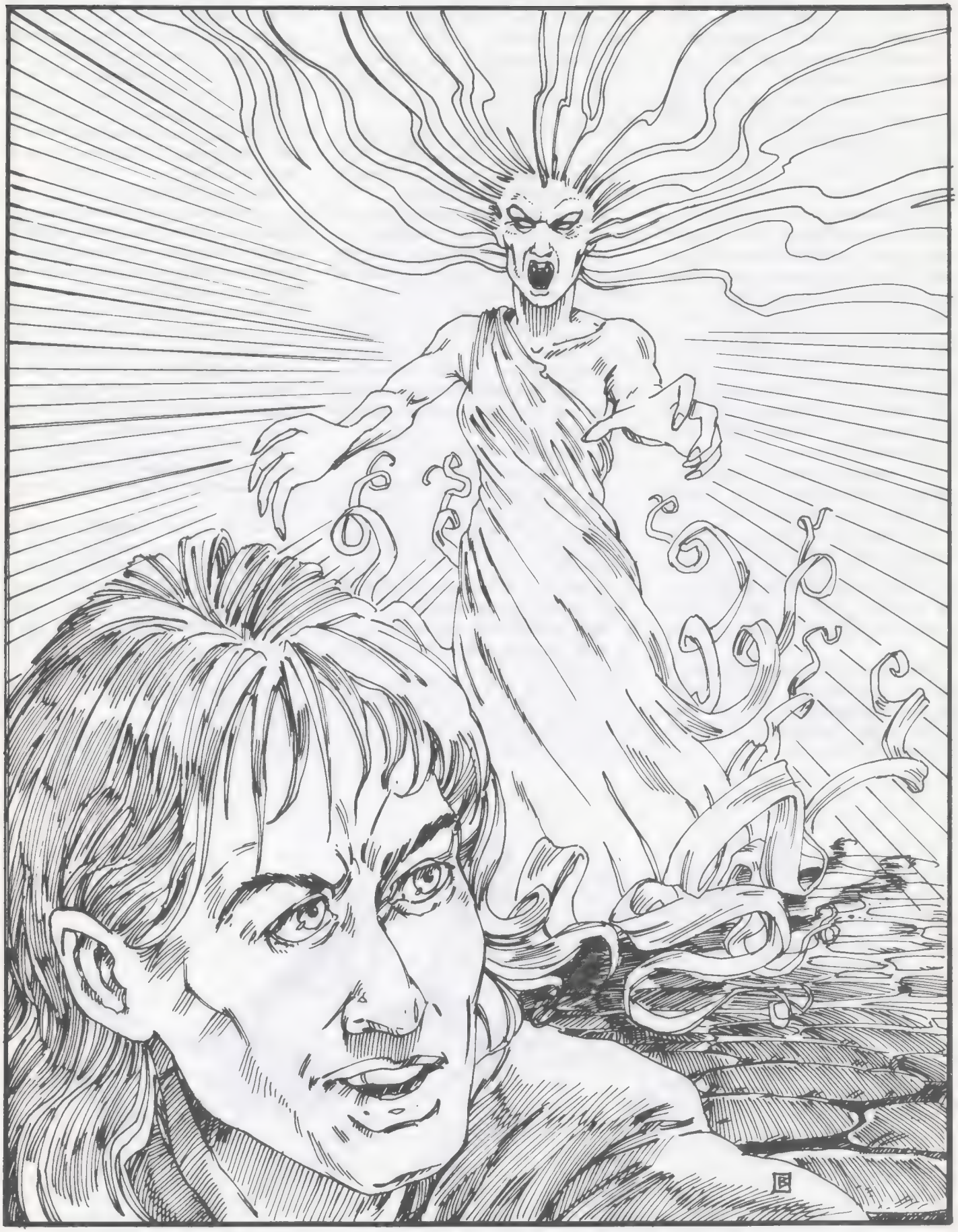

Artwork by James Balkovek

but that does not mean you can escape your doom!"

Fear took away all sense of his purpose. Anwyn turned to flee, but she was like a mist and rose before him, towering in all her hellish glory. He sprang out of reach, whimpering from the terror that locked his mind, and backed across the room. The creature seemed to grow, rearing tall and laughing at his fear. Anwyn continued to back away until the wall stopped him. He watched the succubus writhe and shift, fingers turning into talons, her face like something out of his worst nightmares.

A thrumming sound pierced the fear that froze him in the path of his doom. "Anwyn, the song! Use the Song of Ice!" He closed his eyes and sought the stillness within himself, humming notes in his throat as he forced himself to remember the sorcerous song. He opened his mouth and let his voice fill the chamber.

The succubus howled, drawing back, struggling in the grasp of a canopy of ice growing on her skin. Dark eyes burned with an internal blaze. Anwyn opened his eyes and saw the steam rise as she called her own fire into the battle. He strengthened his song and watched the ice encase the monster. She writhed within her crystalline prison, and a thick fog rose as she fought his magic with her own.

Anwyn changed his song to the Song of Shattering, sinking back against the wall and letting the new melody escape him. He saw the distorted terror on the face of the succubus, before the tower of ice exploded into a multitude of tiny shards. Anwyn dropped, covering Glynnanis with his own body as he turned his face away. Ice pelted his back, stinging through his clothes. He pressed his forehead to the wall, not daring to hope or move. The sound fell off into a gentle whisper of frozen mist, as though it were snowing inside the keep.

Slowly, Anwyn turned back to face the room. Steam billowed out of a hissing fire where chunks of ice had dropped into the flames. The air smelled cold, like after a snowstorm in winter. Other than the glittering coating of crystals, the chamber was empty.

Anwyn rose, his legs weak beneath him. He felt numb as he searched for his pack and bolted for the door. He wanted out of the black tower — to be free of its stench and decay.

Just outside, he paused. A figure stood out in the yard, small body wrapped in a woolen shawl. At first, Anwyn was not sure he trusted his own senses. He stared at Mercy, fear still clutching his heart with a cold hand.

"Anwyn?" she said. "Are you all right?" He took one step across the threshold and fainted.

Anwyn woke up in a bed, his eyes focusing on a beamed ceiling. The blankets covering him were damp with his sweat. His clothes had been removed. As he came to his senses, he sat up with a startled gasp. "Glynnanis!" he called without thinking.

"You are safe," the harp's voice sang to his mind.

He was not alone. Mercy stood beside the bed, wringing a wet towel over a bowl.

She looked startled, then smiled. "Glynnanis?" she repeated. "Is that...her name?"

Anwyn frowned. "Whose name?" he ventured.

"The one you love, silly," she said. "You spoke the name several times in your fever."

"Where's my harp?" Anwyn asked.

"Over there." Mercy pointed towards the corner, and Anwyn felt a wave of relief to see the harp settled in a chair. "It was a miracle you didn't break it when you fainted," she added. "Now, just lie back and relax."

Her hands closed over his bare shoulders, cool from the water on the towel. She touched the cloth to his feverish face, a soothing stroke as he allowed himself to be pressed down on the bed and tended.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asked.

"Three days," she said, stroking his neck and upper chest with the towel.

"Has anything happened in that time?" he asked. "The succubus..."

"Gone," Mercy said, lifting the blanket to stroke the towel across his abdomen.

Anwyn took her by the wrist. She stopped, and once again, he saw the disappointment on her face. He smiled and shook his head. "You're a lovely girl, Mercy," he said, "but I am not what you think. I love another too much."

"Glynnanis?"

Anwyn shrugged, lowering his gaze, not wanting her to see his eyes. "Yes, I love Glynnanis," he said.

Mercy nodded, her small mouth trembling under a weak smile. "I can see that you do," she said. "When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow, if I am able," he said. *Or even if I am not.* There would be no use in him staying here. It would only prolong her agony, he was sure.

"Shall I fetch you some food? Something to drink?"

Anwyn shook his head. "Not now, Mercy. I just want to be alone...please."

Mercy bobbed her head, gathering her bowl and towel and hurrying for the door. She closed it softly, and Anwyn waited a moment before attempting to rise. His body felt weak — the strain of magic on one who had not made the sacrifice necessary to be a mage — when he crawled off the bed. Still, wrapping a blanket about his shoulders, he made his way to the fire and stared at the flames as tears welled in his eyes.

"So, you love me," the voice of the harp sang to him. "I am most flattered."

Anwyn glanced at Glynnanis and managed a weak smile of his own. "We'd best not tell Rhystar, then," he said. "He might become jealous if he thought another had taken his place in my heart."

"Has she?"

Anwyn shook his head, and let the tears flow all the same as he thought of the pain and resignation in poor Mercy's eyes.

❧

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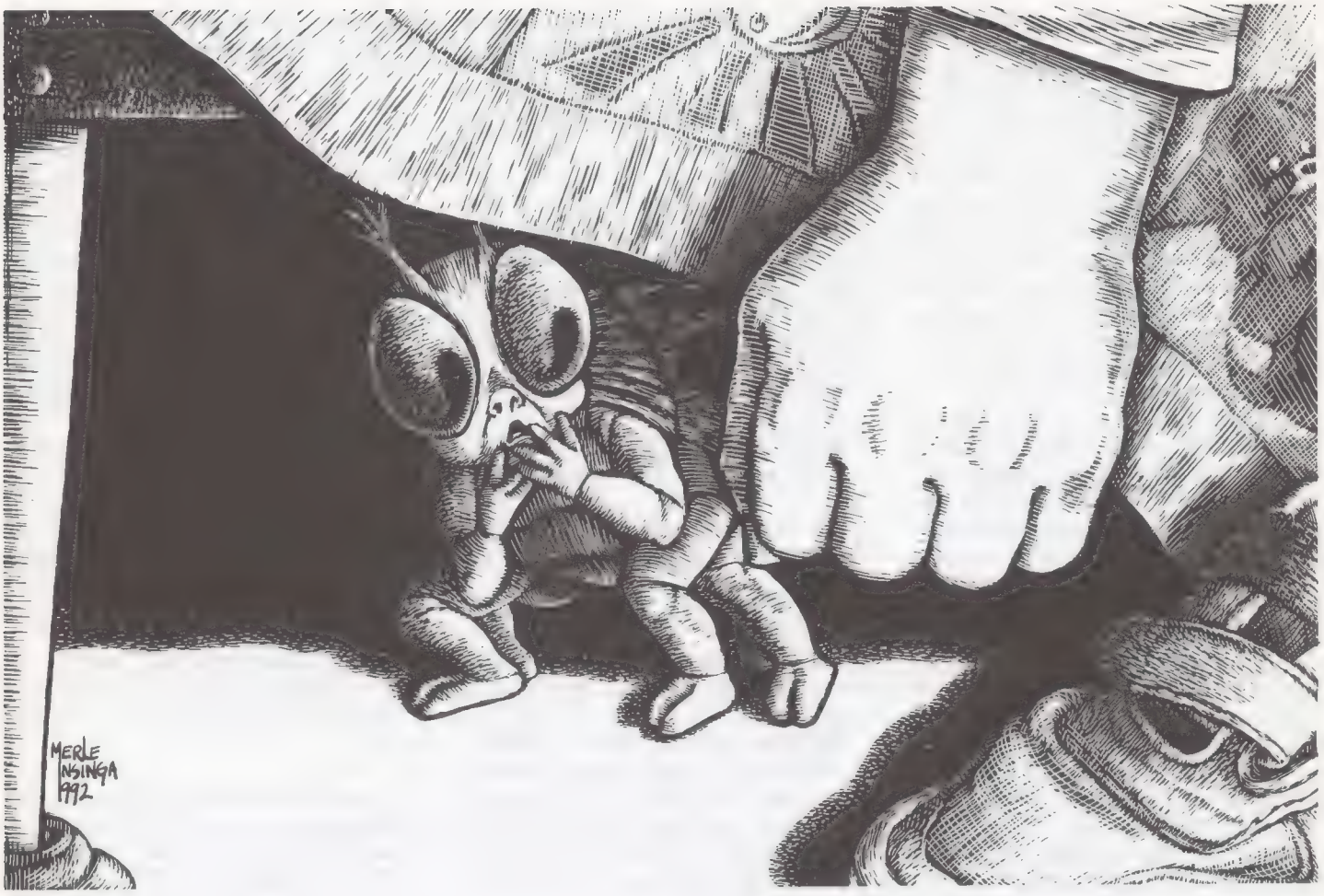


Artwork by Merle Insinga

# by Steve Cooke

She was sure that she had heard It move. Staying absolutely still, she strained to see if she could hear It again. Nothing. But she listened some more, just to make sure. Little Darlene panicked. If she were to believe the advice of her parents, there were no such things as monsters. They said the only thing lurking in her room at night was her imagination.

Nope, didn't work. It was going to get her. It could wait forever. It had the patience of a rock. There! Darlene saw It move. Shadows danced on the far wall. Eerie shapes cavorted and chased each other across the smooth white paint, then charged across the closed door of the closet.

According to Darlene's mother, these dancing shadows were caused by the wind, but Darlene found that hard to believe. At night, everything went to sleep. The only things moving around after dark were BAD things, things like It.

Darlene clamped her eyes shut and tried not to think of anything at all. It didn't work. The harder that Darlene tried to think of nothing, the more her thoughts focused on what It probably wanted to do to her.

Oh, NO! It was moving. Darlene's entire body went cold as she waited for that first dreaded touch. The slightest contact at this point would have propelled her right through the ceiling.

When she couldn't wait any longer, Darlene peeked out to see if anything had changed. She was beginning to wonder if maybe her parents were right after all. Monsters did not exist. She was probably just making a lot of this up.

Continuous contemplation of this comforting conflict-crusher caused Darlene to compose her confidence completely. Her thoughts now drifted off in normal wanderings, toward the fun she would have running around with her friends. She slowly drifted off to sleep, a smile curling up the corners of her mouth.

Darlene woke up disorganized, feeling that something was wrong. The light was on now. Darlene started to investigate, but a muffled sound halted her cold.

Something was moving across the floor. Little Darlene slammed her eyes shut. She just couldn't look. She felt the patter of feet on the hard wooden floor. The vibrations quieted, as the invisible feet found a patch of carpet. The perambulating feet left the room. Darlene shivered as she considered whether or not she had time to dash to her parent's room.

No, It was probably just outside the door, waiting to catch her out in the open. The squeaking floorboards confirmed the worst, It was coming back. The feet pad-

# Who's Been Sleeping In My Bed?

ded over the carpeting. Darlene flinched as the flapping sound moved closer. She went rigid, anticipating Its touch.

The bedsprings creaked. It was climbing onto the bed! What was she going to do? As the minutes dragged on, and on, Darlene wondered what was taking It so long to make a move. She couldn't wait any longer, she had to make her own move before she went crazy. She opened her eyes and looked around. It was worse than she thought. There, at the side of the bed, was a hideous hand. The hand stayed there, unmoving. The short, stubby digits were curled into a neat fist. Discolored fingernails were chewed off, uneven.

Staring at that hand, waiting for It to move, finally gave Darlene the courage to move. She braced herself, then looked at the hand one more time. With the extra energy born from fear, Darlene launched herself across the smooth floor.

As she emerged from under the bed, Darlene saw that her imagination had not done reality justice. It was perched on top of the bed, poised to strike at her sleeping place underneath.

The smooth pink skin almost seemed to glow in the subdued lighting of the room. A thatch of blonde hair sprouted from Its exposed head. Only the wicked beasts of fairy tales had smooth skin and fair hair. Vicious white teeth were exposed in the gaping mouth.

Darlene could not afford to look any more. With a strangled cry, she retracted her arms into the green folds of her carapace and scuttled off down the hall into her parent's room. Once inside, she scurried under their bed, quietly snuggling up to the comforting coolness of her mother's scales. She rubbed her feelers against the familiar shell. It took only minutes for Darlene to fall into a deep slumber in this protected haven. She was safe at last. ❧

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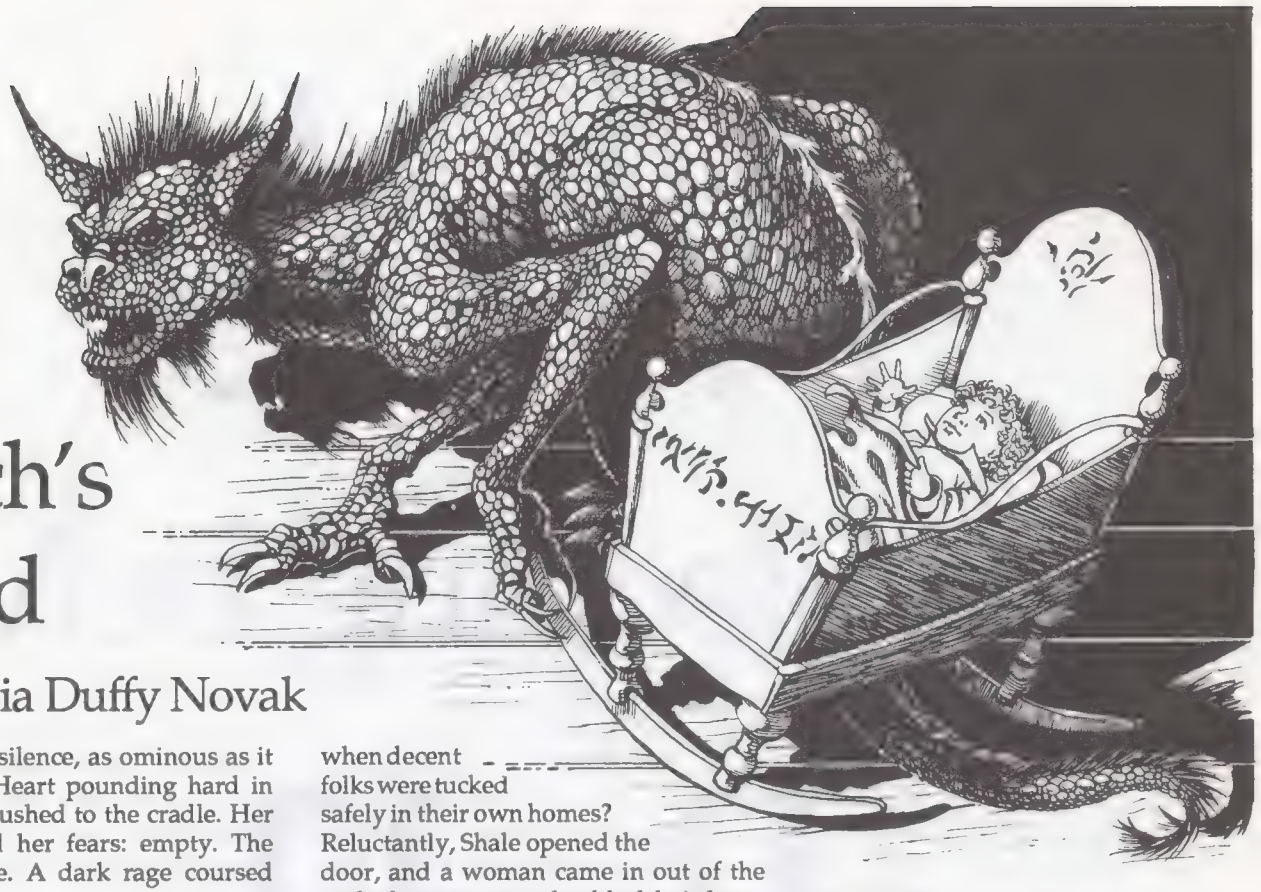
MERLE INSINGA is well-known on the East Coast, where she attends sf conventions; she has been nominated for Hugo Award for Best Fan Artist four times, but hasn't won — yet. She has worked as a professional illustrator on the fantasy and sf fields for about seven years. She lives in Nashua, New Hampshire, with her husband and two children. Some of her work can be seen in the books which NESFA (the New England Science Fiction Association) publishes.

# The Witch's Child



Artwork by Barb Armata

## by Patricia Duffy Novak

She woke to silence, as ominous as it was unusual. Heart pounding hard in her chest, she rushed to the cradle. Her eyes confirmed her fears: empty. The child was gone. A dark rage coursed through her.

She knew who had stolen the child. And she would get it back. By all things of power, she would get it back.

Shale Swordmaster sat by the fire, staring moodily into the flames. Outside, the rain pelted hard against the roof of the cottage, and with each clap of thunder, Shale cast a glance upward, toward the loft. Nothing. Kanie must still be sleeping, undisturbed by the growls of Fram, the thunder god.

Earlier, Shale had slipped a tonic into Kanie's tea, hoping it would bring on a healing sleep. But the loud booming of the storm threatened to undo Shale's efforts. Shale frowned. Three months she'd lived in this miserable cottage, nursemaiding. And Kanie was not making much progress toward recovery. How much longer, Shale asked herself, would she be stuck in this mud-hole of a village, because of the promise she'd made to Karl, her swordmate, to look after his young wife if anything should happen to him. Shale shifted uncomfortably in her chair and let out a light sigh. Well, Karl was dead, and a promise was a promise, after all.

Shale's thoughts were interrupted by a pounding at the door. Who, she wondered, would be out on a night like this when decent folks were tucked safely in their own homes? Reluctantly, Shale opened the door, and a woman came in out of the night, long wet strands of dark hair framing a face that might once have been beautiful but which now could only be described as haggard. There was nothing threatening in the woman's demeanor — quite the contrary in fact — but still Shale shivered uneasily as she observed the stranger, who dripped muddy pools of water on the freshly scrubbed floor.

"If you're seeking shelter from the storm," Shale said, with a grudging courtesy, "then enter and be welcome."

The stranger drew herself up. She was tall, Shale observed, and extremely thin. Her eyes blazed like dark fires against her pallid face.

"Please," the woman said, so softly that Shale had to bend forward to hear, "I've come seeking Shale Swordmaster."

Shale stepped back. "Do you know me?" The hairs at the nape of her neck prickled with suspicion. In the twenty years since she had earned the title of Swordmaster, she'd made her share of enemies. Hired assassins had stalked her steps before.

As if reading Shale's fears, the woman spread her open hands in a gesture of submission. "I heard that a retired mercenary of that name had come to Bryssdal shire. That's all." Retired? Was that what was being said of her? Shale scowled. If so, it was more than time that rumor be put to rest.

If only she hadn't promised Karl. "What do you want of me?" she said. "State your business."

"I wish to engage your services. I can pay you well."

At the mention of payment, Shale's mood lifted for a moment. Then she shook her head, remembering her sworn duty. "I'm sorry," she said, "I can't help you." The woman reached under her cloak, pulled out a pouch, shook it open, and held out the contents. Shale sucked in her breath.

"Firestones," she breathed. She reached out a finger and gently caressed one of the glowing gems.

The woman snatched the stones away and dropped them back into the pouch. "Yours if you succeed."

Shale stood for a long moment without speaking. Then she shook her head again. "I'm pledged here."

The other woman, who had seemed so strong and resolute only a moment before, collapsed into a small heap on the floor. She clutched her sodden cloak about her shoulders and rocked back and forth crying, "My baby, oh my baby. You must save my baby."

Shale stared, unimpressed by the theatrical display. And she winced inwardly at the mention of a baby. It was, in a

certain sense, a baby that had gotten her into her current predicament.

"Shale... "

Startled, Shale spun around and there was Kanie, drowsy confusion in her eyes. Even the strongest herbs from the town apothecary had not been enough to ensure a whole night's sleep.

"I heard someone come in," Kanie said, tugging her flannel robe across her breasts. Then her gaze lighted on the stranger, who still lay in a heap on the floor. "Poor woman, what's the matter?"

A surge of concern pulsed in Shale's heart. Kanie was so small, so frail, so ill herself, and yet she could still spare sympathy for a stranger. Then Shale shook her head. What was the matter with her lately? Why was she getting so soft and sentimental? Duty held her here, nothing more.

"You should not be out of bed," she said gruffly. "I'll handle this." But Kanie kept her place.

The strange woman looked up, letting her eyes lock on Kanie's as if sensing sympathy there. "Oh, please, help me," she rasped. "They've stolen my child, my little girl, only two months old."

Shale saw the last vestiges of color drain from Kanie's cheeks and thought for a moment that the young woman might faint. Instead, Kanie ran forward and threw her arms around the huddled form of the stranger.

"Oh, Shale," she said, her voice choked with emotion, "you will help her, won't you?"

Greedily, Shale recalled the touch of the firestones. She knew her duty, but if Kanie insisted...

"Let us sit by the fire," Shale said to the stranger, "and I'll listen to your story and decide."

They seated themselves, and the stranger leaned toward Shale and said, "I'm called Anyel Marshdaughter. My baby has been stolen by the Sorceress Manarra, who spirited it away in the dead of the night. I want it back."

Shale cast a covert glance at Kanie, who sat silently, a plump pillow clutched to her breast. Kanie's eyes were unfocused, and her fingers stroked the pillow, as if to soothe it. Shale quickly looked away. Outside, on the hillside above the house, a tiny grave dotted the red earth. Two weeks ago, Kanie's baby, little Ilsa, not yet a month old, had succumbed to the fever that had decimated the village. Kanie herself had barely survived the disease and now, having lost in the scope of three months both husband and child, seemed to have no will to live. And so Shale was trapped by her own vow into staying on and on, nursing her dead partner's wife.

Shale turned to studied Anyel, who seemed once again in complete control of herself, nothing like a grieving mother. Living with Kanie, Shale had learned all too well the price of a mother's grief. "And why should Manarra want your daughter?" Shale asked. "She's never seemed overly maternal."

"The Feast of the Dead approaches. Manarra will sacrifice the child to the Evil Ones, binding them to help her steal the power of the Goddess of the Four Winds."

Kanie gasped. "Oh, Shale, you must save the child. Ah, the poor little thing."

"One child more or less in the world matters very little to me," Shale said. "And Manarra is powerful." Slowly, she ran her left hand along her right arm, feeling even through her heavy tunic the rough swelling of proud flesh. The last time she had gone against a sorceress, she had barely escaped with her life. Karl had not been so lucky.

"You can not mean that, Shale," Kanie said quietly. "You, too, grieved for Ilsa."

That was true, but Shale hated to admit it. Well, no more. She shrugged her shoulders. "I can't battle Manarra alone. There would be no point."

Anyel reached a slender hand to her throat and pulled back her robe. A power stone pulsed against her neck. "You wouldn't be alone," she said.

Shale stared. So the stranger was a sorceress! She had never heard of such a one bearing a child! Shale's mind rapidly processed the new information. This changed the odds considerably. "How good are you?" she asked.

Anyel gave a delicate shrug. "Third class."

"Hmm." Shale considered. Manarra was not much better than that; they should be able to win easily. And the firestones would fetch a small fortune at the market in Zim. She would never have to worry about money again.

Kanie's eyes bored into her, seeming to urge her into decision. "All right," Shale said, "but payment in advance."

Anyel dropped the pouch into Shale's eager hand. "Now, see that you earn them," she said, as Shale pocketed the stones.

The next morning dawned grey and misty, but the worst of the storm had passed. Shale saddled her gelding and

Artwork by Barb Armata

watched as Anyel clumsily prepared her own mount. "We'll arrive at Manarra's hold by late afternoon if we make good time," Shale said pointedly. Anyel only grunted as she struggled with the girth.

"Not much of a horsewoman, are you?" Shale commented, coming to Anyel's aid.

Anyel shot her a withering look. "I'm a sorceress, not a stable hand."

Shale raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as she deftly finished the task. She stroked the mare's velvet flank.

"There," she said. Then she turned to Anyel. "Can you mount unassisted or do you need a hand up?"

In response, Anyel swung gracefully into the saddle. Shale followed suit, and they rode off, down the narrow forest trail that led north. The two of them spoke little as they rode, and Shale had plenty of time to observe Anyel. The woman seemed oddly calm, unconcerned about the fight ahead of them, unconcerned about the fate of her child.

"Are you so certain we'll win?" Shale asked when they had stopped for a short rest. The vestiges of the storm had passed, and the sky, what she could see of it through the canopy of pines, was clear and bright. The ground, though, was still damp.

She reached into her saddlebag and pulled out a stout cloth, which she started to spread on the ground. Anyel watched

Shale unfold the cloth, but did not offer to help. "I have confidence in my chosen weapon," she said, eyes alight with mocking laughter.

Shale stood up. "Is that what you think I am, your weapon?"

"You are what you choose to be," Anyel said, and smiled enigmatically.

Shale snorted. She returned to her horse, fished around in the saddlebag again, palmed two small apples, and tossed one to Anyel. Then she leaned against a tree trunk, planting her boots in the pliant ground, and hastily devoured her snack. Anyel sat down on the cloth Shale had spread and slowly ate her own apple. When she had finished, she reached thin hands toward Shale. "Now, hand me your sword so I can spell it."

Shale pulled her sword from the sheath that lay against her back and held it up so that it caught a ray of sun that filtered down through the tree branches. The blade was old and dull, nicked here and there from past encounters, still serviceable, but nothing a swordmaster could show with pride.

Anyel took the sword from Shale's hands and laid it on the cloth at her feet. She bent over it, chanting something in a soft, low voice. As Anyel's incantation rose in intensity, three rays of sunlight bent sharply, angling toward the sword, and merged to bathe it in an intense, unearthly light. The blade glowed red-gold and sparks of fire danced along its length. Then Anyel spread her arms wide and the sunlight dispersed. But the blade still glowed with power.

"A good spelling," Anyel said, nodding. "It will serve us well."

Shale picked up the sword by the hilt. Cautiously, she extended an index finger toward the blade, wondering if it would burn her hand, but the metal felt oddly cold, as frigid as Lord Death's left hand. She sheathed the weapon. "Come," she said. "Let us ride."

Manarra's keep rose menacingly from the foothills of the Quiet Mountains. Black granite towers extended upward, silhouetted against the rose-colored evening sky. Around and around the highest pinnacle of the keep bats circled, tiny wings beating in graceful rhythm. Shale, keen-eyed in spite of her age, surveyed the lay of Manarra's land.

Shale saw no human guards, but the bats, still circling, roused her suspicions. "I think they're spelled to guard the keep," she said, pointing upward. "Can you set a counter spell?"

Anyel squinted and watched the bats for a long moment. "Perhaps," she said, pulling her power stone from beneath her tunic. She stared into the stone for several minutes, her face contorted in hard concentration. "Done," she said at last. "They should pay us no mind.

Shale's hands tightened on the reins. "We can put the horses over there," she said, indicating a small stand of trees.

They staked the horses and set off down the hill. Above them, the bats wheeled and turned, disquieted, but seemingly unable to locate the source of irritation. "This is almost too easy," Shale started to say, but before she could finish speaking, the ground around them began to rumble. Instinctively, Shale dropped into a crouch. "Get down," she barked at Anyel.

Before Anyel could respond, a sharp upheaval in the earth beneath her feet sent her reeling to the ground. "Use the sword," Anyel hissed, as she dug her hands into the soft dirt, trying to hold on.

Shale, thrown to her knees by the pitching and yawing of the land, stared at Anyel, uncomprehending.

"Use it!" Anyel shrieked as the ground directly in front of her yawned open. She rolled away just in time, as the fissure spread to the spot where she had been only seconds before.

With difficulty, Shale pulled her sword free of its sheath. The sword was spelled — it would amplify her natural talents a hundredfold — but how could she fight the very earth?

The quakes intensified and deep crevasses opened all around Shale, threatening to swallow her. In desperation, she shoved her blade into the ground. A groan, deep and terrible, like that of an animal in pain, answered her thrust. "Again!" Anyel cried. "Strike again!"

At Shale's second thrust, the heaving of the earth began to subside. She struck a third time, and then once again, until, at last, the land lay quiet. Anyel picked herself up and dusted off her clothing.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded, eyes flashing fire. "You nearly got us killed."

"You're alive, aren't you?" Shale wiped her sword against a pant leg, but did not resheath it.

"Little thanks to you."

"I didn't see you doing anything to help, oh great sorceress," Shale said.

"Setting a spell requires concentration, something that is difficult to come by in the middle of an attack. Why do you think I hired you and spelled your sword? Have you no knowledge at all of wizardry?"

"And where would I have learned wizardry? I certainly don't recall you giving me any instructions," Shale said. Anyel opened her mouth to reply, but Shale held up a hand, silencing her. "Now," Shale said, "do you want to stand here arguing all night, or do you want to get your daughter back?"

Anyel glared. "Well, it's too late to find another swordmaster, more's the pity for that. Just remember that a spelled sword combats magical as well as natural foes. I thought everyone knew that!"

Shale grunted. Only the thought of the precious firestones in her pocket kept her from turning on her heel and leaving Anyel to face Manarra alone. "Come on," she said roughly and strode off, down the path toward the castle. Anyel, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

"Now what shall we do?" Shale asked, when they came to the door of the keep, which was securely bolted shut. "Knock politely and ask admittance?"

Anyel reached under her robe and pulled out the power stone. "Step aside." She placed her right hand against the door and clutched the stone in her left. Light shimmered around the edges of the door and it began to crack.

"Enough!" shouted a voice from deep within the keep. "No need to shatter the door." With a boom, the heavy wooden door swung inward, revealing a long, dark hallway. The last rays of the setting sun barely penetrated into the gloom.

"Come!" Anyel said as she swept forward and moved purposefully down the hall. Shale, hands locked firmly on the hilt of her sword, followed slowly, eyes scanning from side to side, searching for hidden dangers. At the end of the hall, soft light from an open door spilled into the darkness. "Manarra!" Anyel cried, as she plunged through the doorway.

Shale lingered on the threshold, staring into a cavernous, sparsely furnished room, where the dim glow of half a dozen candles illuminated the figure of the sorceress Manarra. She was old, Manarra, with heavy white ropes of hair falling about her shoulders, and with eyes as flat and cold as glacial ice, but the power in her was strong and deep; Shale could feel it.

Manarra raised a sinewy arm and pointed at Anyel. "You! How dare you come here? You have borne a child and disgraced your rank. Abomination!"

Anyel took a step toward the old sorceress and flung out her hands. "And I want it back! It's mine. Give it to me!"

Artwork by Barb Armata

Artwork by Barb Armata

"Never!"

"I will not be denied. I will find the child." Anyel pushed past Shale and ran back down the long dark hallway. To Shale's surprise, the old sorceress didn't follow. Instead, she turned her gaze to Shale. "Come in," she said, beckoning with her hand. "I have no quarrel with you..." She paused for a moment and smiled, "...yet."

Shale stayed put, her hands tightening on the handle of her sword.

"Oh, come, come," Manarra said. "I know you're her hireling, but I can pay you more than she can."

Sensing no immediate menace from the old sorceress, Shale took a cautious step into the room. "I do not go back on my word."

"No?" Manarra laughed. "Perhaps when you learn a little more. Do you know why Anyel bore that child? Let me tell you what she plans —"

An enraged shriek brought Manarra up short. She shook her head. "Impulsive. That one always was impulsive. Did she think I would leave the child unguarded, simply let her walk off with it, after all my trouble fetching it here?"

Anyel fairly flew back into the room, her dark hair and clothing in disarray. She left a slightly charred odor in her wake. "A demon guards the child," she said to Shale. "You must slay the creature. Come with me."

"Wait." Manarra's voice, surprisingly strong, rang out as Shale turned to go. "You," Manarra pointed at Anyel again, "tell your hireling what you plan to do with the child. Abomination."

Anyel grabbed Shale by the arm. "It is of no consequence. Come."

"Tell her," Manarra commanded, "that you plan to sacrifice your own child to the Evil Ones so that they will help you rob the Goddess of the Four Winds of the Power of Storm. Fool! The Evil Ones deceived you. A child of your own blood cannot be used as sacrifice! When the Evil Ones drink the baby's blood, which is linked to yours, they will gain ascendancy over you! They will lap up your very soul. And then the Goddess, in revenge for what you planned, will destroy every sorceress in the Four Lands."

"You are the fool, Manarra," Anyel said in a tone of ice, "to think I would believe your lies. You yourself would sacrifice the child to the Evil Ones to gain power."

"Not true. I will raise her in service to the Goddess. What you plan is abomination!" Manarra turned to Shale. "You, swordswoman, would you see the Goddess's wrath brought down upon us all?"

Anyel's face twisted into an ugly sneer. "Do not believe her lies, Shale! She does plan to sacrifice the child. It is my child. I bore it. I will not let her gain the power I seek!"

Manarra laughed, an abrupt staccato burst. "And what if I do plan to sacrifice the child? It is a child of magic, but none of my blood. The Evil Ones would be bound to me."

Shale felt her mouth drop open as she turned from old sorceress to young one to old again, unable to think of an appropriate word to say. Anyel turned on Shale with fury. "You are sworn to me. You will do as I say!"

Shale, no longer shocked into muteness, shook free of Anyel. "Return the child to you, so you can slay it?"

Anyel's face puckered in scorn. "'One child more or less in the world matters very little to me.' Were those not your words?"

Shale felt the bile rising in her throat. "I've had enough of you and your contempt. I am a swordmaster. I choose my own battles. You and you," she nodded at Manarra, "can settle your quarrels without my aid."

She reached into her pants pocket and pulled out the purse that held the stones. "I will keep this for my trouble," she said, withdrawing one stone. She closed the bag and flung it at Anyel's feet. Then she turned and walked out of the room. As she strode back down the hall, thinking with some regret of the firestones she had given up, she could hear behind her, the sounds of the two sorceresses continuing their quarrel, and ahead of her,

coming from one of the closed rooms, the plaintive wail of a baby.

"Kanie!" The door of the cottage slammed behind Shale. "Kanie, where are you?"

"Here, Shale." Kanie climbed down the ladder from the loft, and approached Shale, who remained half-turned away from her. A frown creased Kanie's brow. "What happened? Your clothes are all singed! Are you all right?"

Shale grinned and pivoted forward to face Kanie, but kept her arms hidden inside her clothing. "Got into a fight with a demon, but I came out the winner. No real harm done to me. Just a little scorched around the edges."

"Did you save that poor child?"

Shale reached forward and lay a small, squirming bundle in Kanie's arms. "See for yourself."

The baby clung for a moment to Shale's cloak, but then, seeing Kanie's face, she broke into a wide smile, her little arms waving in glee. Kanie cradled the baby, who nestled contentedly against her breast. "Oh, the precious little thing. What a sweet face she has, don't you darling?" The baby cooed. Kanie beamed. "I'm so glad you found her in time. Where's Anyel?"

"It's a long story, but I'll have plenty of time to tell you as we travel to Dressen."

"Dressen? But that's a hundred miles away!"

"Right, and I wish it were farther. Now, while you take care of the baby, I'll get us packed. I hope your milk hasn't dried up."

"No, I'm sure it hasn't. But why do we have to leave?"

"I left Anyel quarreling with Manarra, but I have a feeling whoever comes off the winner is going to come skulking after me, and I'd rather not take on either one of them if I can avoid it— even with a spelled sword." Shale wondered how long it would take Anyel to realize that, with Shale's hasty departure, the blade had not been unmagicked.

Then Shale smiled. "Although, this is the darndest thing, Kanie. You know how warm and fair this Spring has been?" Kanie nodded, and Shale continued. "As I left Manarra's hold, a strong wind blew down from the North and it started to snow behind me, covering up my tracks. The storm seems to be holding just over the rise, as if it's waiting for us to get moving. We should get to Dressen safely."

"And I'm to keep the baby?" Kanie asked.

Shale smiled as she heard the undisguised hope in Kanie's voice. "It would be for the best, yes."

"What's her name?"

Shale shrugged. "I don't think she has one."

Kanie studied the baby for a moment, then smiled. The first rays of the morning sun caught the gold in Kanie's hair, and she seemed, for the first time in months, well and happy. "With those determined blue eyes and that dark red hair, she reminds me, in some ways, of Karl. I think I'll call her Karlene."

"An excellent choice," Shale said, with a small catch in her voice, as she recalled the man who had been her friend and partner. She wondered if she would ever tell Kanie the entire story of Karl's death. Probably not. Shale tickled Karlene under her round little chin, then bolted up the ladder to the loft to get her belongings together for the journey.

❧

**Patricia Duffy Novak** lives in Opelika, Alabama, with an assortment of cats and dogs, her husband Jim, and her young daughter Sylvia. She is an associate professor of Agricultural Economics at Auburn University, and has has numerous stories published in *FANTASY Magazine*, three Darkover anthologies, and SWORD AND SORCERESS.

**Barb Armata** is a native of the Northern Berkshires and lives in Adams, Mass. An inborn love of horses drove her to attempt to draw them and other animals at an early age. In the decades since, she's thankfully improved a little. Comics and the works of Andre Norton introduced her to sf and fantasy, and the aliens of Lloyd Biggle Jr.'s books caused a revolution in her zoological art outlook. She has dabbled in several areas of art, doing commercial signs and ads, comics, illustration, and paintings. She must have the stereo on while working; art-rock preferably. She thanks her family for their support. Her paintings of "the odd, the alien and the everyday" can be seen at Northeast sf art shows such as Boskone.

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# Queeneyes

## by eluki bes shahar

Everyone knew you had to be virgin for the Sight. Avarach knew it better than most; for her it wasn't just a singer's tale but a real true way out of the Choirdip barrio.

Avarach was twelve. And the Choosers were coming this year.

She would go with them. She knew it. She had to. The Sight was a part of her earliest memories, a bright winged numen that warmed her when there was no fire and fed her on futures when food was scant.

Queeneyes, the gift was called in the barrio, though it came to boys as often as girls. But the boys must be gelded to keep it past youth, and many lost it then in spite of the surgeon's knife.

Far better to be a girl, Avarach thought, and hoarded each sample of her specialness like hot autumnal gold.

Sometimes the visions were jumbled, other times they were just plain wrong. Avarach had taught herself by slow trial and error to understand their grammarie, but true knowledge would only come when the Choosers took her, placed their imprimatur upon her gift and taught her the ways of it. Now it strained, bewilderingly, at the limits of her understanding, demanding as some new-caught wild thing, avid and importunate.

Meanwhile she had to survive. In the Choirdip barrio survival meant work, no matter what your age.

Avarach found work — and learning of a sort — in a tumbledown shop at the edge of Choirdip's barrio where she cleaned and fetched and counted and was paid in food and castoffs too poor to sell. Avarach had come to this service through a small dispute as to the ownership of a loaf of bread. Her hand still bore the scar of the knife, but instead of slow murder or slavery at the hands of the thieftakers, Avarach had been taken in and taught. Quick enough for a Harkady scribe, her mistress said — and laughed, though Avarach never knew why.

Her mistress's name was Cheyne, and Cheyne wore two pieces of green turquoise in her left ear and a dangly gold moon in her right. Her little shop was filled with books, and perhaps she was right in what she said about Avarach, but only the Chapterhouse in Harkady possessed the arcanum of reading and writing, and Avarach had no wish to give up mother and family and home for the dubious benefits of literacy. So she laughed with Mistress Cheyne and took her pay.

This day Avarach stood counting — matching pairs of dice in one of the windowless rooms that made up Mistress Cheyne's establishment. Each set must match in size and weight and color, and young eyes were sharpest. Outside the sky was the phoenix-blue of early spring, but Avarach's mind and stomach and perhaps her heart were fixed on the two loaves of brown bread Mistress Cheyne had promised her when the day was over. Nimbly she sorted the dice: the shaved with the shaved, the weighted with the weighted, and the true and honest matched by size. In a fortnight the Choosers would come and then all of this would be over: only a dream, a bitter prelude to her real life.

"When you're done there, sweep the front room all the way to the street," said Mistress Cheyne, grading loose gemstones in the strong light of candles and mirrors. Nearly as good as direct sun, and a deal safer to use in the Choirdip barrio.

"Soon I won't be coming back here."

The news was too good to keep, and something almost-Sighted in her heart urged Avarach to tell. Mistress Cheyne raised her eyes from her work, regarding Avarach with a bland disbelief that made words come hot and easy.

"The Choosers are coming in two weeks. There'll be a fair, and the magistrate swears holiday. Anyone who wants can go to the Crownpriests — it's a fine if they stop you — they test for the Sight — they'll choose me—"

"Have you Seen it?" Mistress Cheyne asked. Avarach stopped. In all her gaudy scraps of vision it was the one thing she had never seen: the moment when she became a legend.

"I know they'll choose me. And then we'll all go away, Mama and Granddam and baby Egland and even the twins, and—"

The still look on Cheyne's face stopped her. That look meant danger, and Avarach froze in response. They stared at each other for a long moment, and then Cheyne spoke.

"The Choosers will take only you."

Only her? But that couldn't be. She was young yet, a child, surely they would know that and see, and take her mother with them — mother and grandmother and of course they could not leave the children behind...

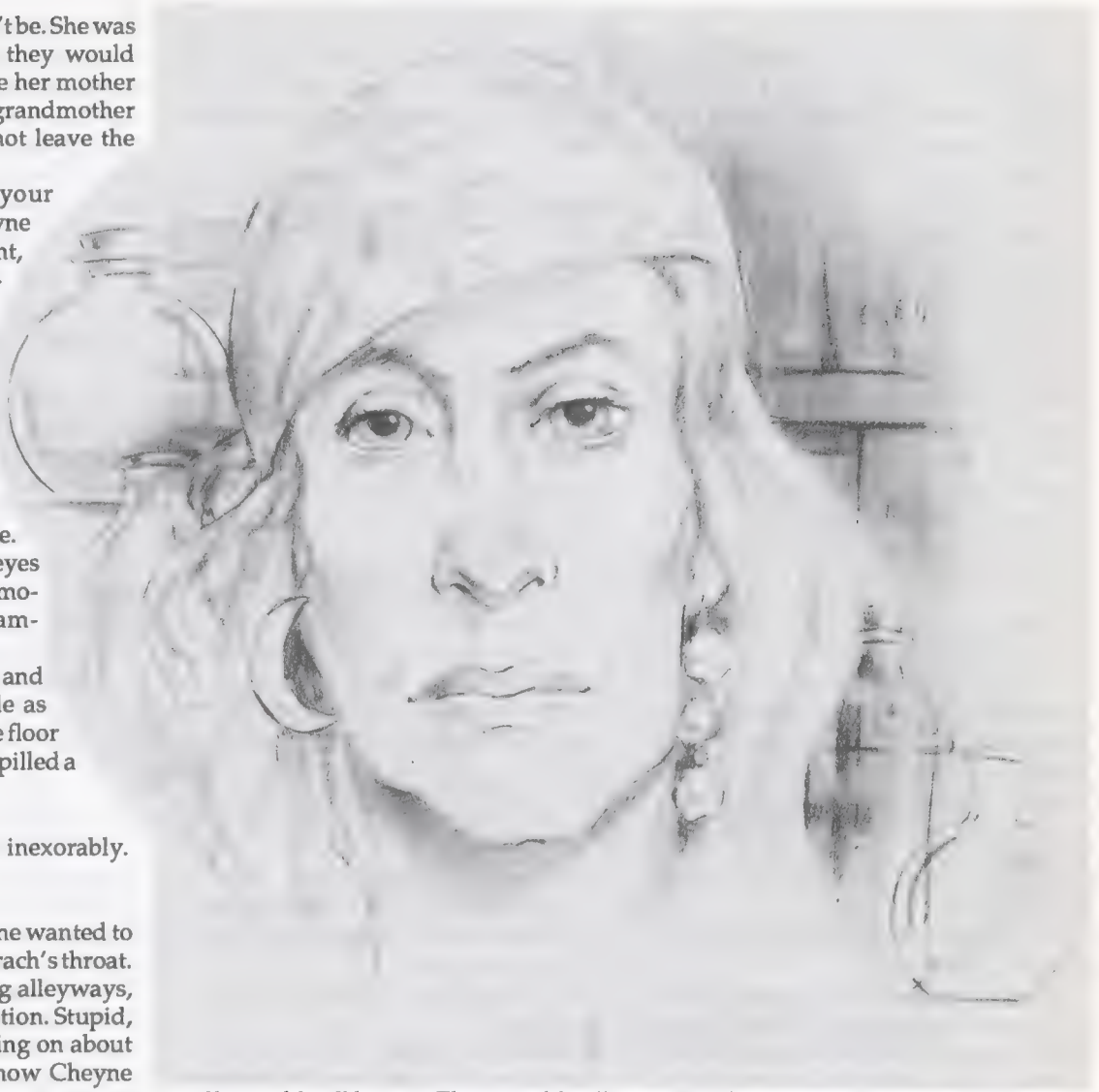
"The College will be your mother and father," Cheyne said as if she too had the Sight, could look and see each frantic turning, each evasion of Avarach's willingness to know. "The Crownpriests test any who come to them claiming the Sight, for only so can the Starharp be reclaimed by the world. Those who have it they will take. That is the law. But queen's eyes have their price. From that moment all ties of blood and family are—"

"No!" Avarach started up and away, thudding into a table as she retreated. It rocked to the floor with a breaking sound and spilled a tray of spices.

Cheyne didn't move.

"—severed," she finished inexorably.

Avarach ran.



Artwork by SandraTempleton

Liar, liar, liar, the words she wanted to say rose stranglingly in Avarach's throat. She ran through the twisting alleyways, trying to outrun her humiliation. Stupid, she'd been so stupid, prattling on about how special she was, and now Cheyne would laugh, and tell....

But Cheyne would neither laugh nor tell, and Cheyne knew everything, and always told the truth. Avarach slowed down, pulled to a walk by the burning stitch in her side and the bleak pain in her chest.

The Crownpriests would not care for her mother, her brothers, or her family. And the gift she had counted on to save all of them could only save her.

She tried to summon her gift, to grab its bright wings and force it to show her happy futures. But her Sight was erratic, untrained. Surety in the Sight was the gift the Crownpriests gave, the heritage Avarach had always been certain would be hers. Above the canted rooftops she could see the gleaming gold of the palace towers, beautiful and far in a clean bright world that only the brightness in Avarach would let her reach. She yearned for that greatness, the world of certainty and honor a universe away from her own. The world she could reach.

She could still have it. They would still take her. They would.

But only her.

Her footsteps took Avarach in the direction of the Bazaar. She passed the fine house, near the Trade Gate and the caravans, where Mother Dace's wares lounged and lingered and fanned themselves in the sun. Pomegranate lips and beetle-wing eyelids, glittering with glass and false gold and scented ripe as a festival garden. Their skin had the sheen of bathing and oiling, the ripeness of plentiful food and often. Dace took care of her wares and took care to keep them fresh — just last year when Avarach had begun to bleed, Dace had come and offered Avarach's mother a whole gold coin for a year of Avarach's time. A year could lead to another year, to more, to a villa in the cool hills north of Choirdip and a protector who would weight her wrists and ankles with gauds that were not glass and gilded tin.

But there were other ways. The ways of heroes to bend and stretch the world to their design. Of warrior-priestesses, cloaked in white and sheathed in glittering mail, riding at the right hand of judges and priests, dispensing truth and justice and law in the bright sun.

Virgin for the Sight.

It was late when Avarach reached home — lateness caused in part by remembering she had not taken — or earned — the bread that Cheyne had promised her. The early spring day had turned to bone-cold winter when the sun set, and the little lane was blue with dusk. Oil that could be eaten was too precious to burn.

Avarach came to her front door and lifted the latch. The room beyond was as blue and cold as the street behind. No fire in the grate. Not even a stoup of hot water to warm her.

The baby lay swaddled near the ashes of the fire. The twins were nowhere to be seen.

"Mother?" said Avarach.

Her grandmother entered at the sound, letting the drape that concealed the doorway to the interior room fall behind her. Ignoring Avarach, she shuffled past her to the door and barred it for night.

"Granddam?"

Avarach's grandmother looked at her. Her eyes were hard and bright, her hair — if any — concealed beneath a threadbare scarf.

"Your mother's sick."

Avarach shrugged, one-shouldered. Her mother had been sick as long as she could remember — since the twins were born, and they were nearly eight. Five children born only to die had not helped. The baby — not yet a year old — was the last fruit of her parents' marriage, and Avarach's father had not lived to see him.

"Very sick this time," Granddam said. "She's going to die."

Now Avarach registered the too-stillness of the house. The twins must be with a neighbor. She listened hard, and imagination painted her mother's labored breathing. Winterkill, the barrio called it. An affliction of the weak, the cold, and the hungry.

"We have to get her a doctor, Granddam."

Her grandmother laughed and spat into the cold hearth.

"And do you think a doctor is going to come here, my fine lady? Doctors want coin." Slowly she began laying a new fire in the grate. Sticks and scavengings. Hoarded chips of coal.

The baby began to cry. He was hungry — Avarach's mother was still suckling him.

"There's some — there is!"

"And did I spend it on her and not the taxman, my Marram wouldn't forgive me — not and see the lot of you taken to pay the rate."

Avarach picked up her small brother, wet and cold and furious with neglect.

"What there was to spare went to the apothecary. There's nothing more."

The old woman took a carefully-curled spill and lit it from the firepot on the mantle. The yellow light cast the room into sharp relief: the walls, whitewashed and painted with flowers before Avarach was born, now grey except for the pale silhouettes of furniture sold; grey with the dirt there was not strength or resource to remove.

Poverty.

There had never been money, even while her soldier-father had been alive. Avarach had grown up doing without, living for the day she would ride out on a fine horse wearing silk and vair and armor of silver and gold. Crownpriestess. Hero.

But while she had dreamed, the elegancies of cleanliness, warmth, and comfort had been surrendered, battles lost, until all that was left was the naked struggle to live.

And they were going to lose it.

Avarach lay on her hard bed, twelve years old and filled with glory. A few feet away her mother tossed and coughed and muttered. The poppy-head tea that Granddam had bought helped only a little, and had to be saved for the worst.

The Sight stretched Avarach like an old wineskin, creaking and dangerous and filled with prophecy, but this time it turned her vision outward, not in.

Without Marram there would be no family. The baby would die, the twins would disappear into one of the roving bands of child-thieves that plagued Choirdip — if they were lucky. And Granddam... Who would care for a quarrelsome old woman, or offer her a seat by their fire?

But Avarach would be safe. Feted by the Crownpriests, cherished for her Sight, fed on wine and white bread and dressed in clean new wool.

Climbing to heroism over the bodies of her family.

But there's nothing I can do! Avarach pleaded with the darkness. It's the future — I can't change it! There's nothing I can do — nothing!

Just out of reach, the power and the promise. She would be chosen by the Crownpriests and rise high in the councils of the Crown of Alarra. Her voice would shape the law. Pensions would be paid and almshouses founded. The widows of heroes would not starve in the street.

Someday.

In the morning Marram was worse. Avarach spent a fruitless hour trying to feed the baby warm gruel from a wooden spoon. She wasted more than he ate and wept for the loss.

Granddam went to beg and borrow from the neighbors. The twins came home and left again as quickly, frightened in the presence of disaster, going to the marketplace to scavenge and steal and hasten the day when ill-luck caught them and fastened iron collars about their necks until their bond was paid.

And what Avarach must do waited, standing so heavy and dark in the road to her future that if she looked up she must surely see it.

Granddam came home with a basket over which the cloth lay flaccid. Egland had cried himself to sleep again. He lay by the fire in a basket too poor to sell.

Avarach met her grandmother's eyes.

"It's good you're back. I'm going out." Avarach pushed the door wide and stepped into the street.

She knew where she was going but pretended she did not. She went instead to Mistress Cheyne's house, hoping for some upstart miracle that would let her bargain with the future.

But the shutters and door were barred, even at this late hour, and no one came for all Avarach's knocking. At last she gave up and went where she must.

The fine house near the Trade Gate had a servant's entrance. Avarach knew enough to go there instead of to the front door with its ornaments of gryphons and phoenice.

"Go away, beggar brat!" said the cook who opened it.

"I want to see Mother Dace!" said Avarach desperately. "She wants to see me. She said so."

The room where Avarach was brought to wait was grand beyond imagining. There were carpets on the colored tile floors and painted walls of wood and stone. A silver bowl so big that the profits from its sale would feed everyone who lived on her street for a year sat on a table with a top that was a picture made of colored glass.

Avarach's new future reached for her, black and suffocating. An end to all magic. She fought an urge to run, and the knowledge of failure.

I do this myself! Avarach said in fierce silence. By myself and for myself, and for no one's will but mine!

Mother Dace would pay. A gold coin for a year of her time — enough to buy life and honesty for her mother and grandmother and brothers. There might be more — at least silver. Her family needed it to live. There was no one but her to earn it.

Avarach had always wanted to save the world. Now she knew where she had to start.

A week later a girl called Queeneyes stood in that room and waited for Mother Dace to come. She had left her home and given up her name to come here. Mother

Dace had chosen the new one, not knowing how it hurt.

Avarach would never tell her. In a handful of days she had learned to answer to it, had learned the taste of fat capon and the feel of scented oils on her skin. The Sight that still burned within her cast shattered sparks of might-be futures across her vision; all doomed now.

She could still run. There was still time. The man was not here yet. She was not watched. But if she broke her word Dace would want her gold back, and the gold had been spent already, on bread and oil and brandy and medicine from the doctor — strong poppy sirup that let her mother sleep and heal.

The only repayment there could be was in kind — if not Avarach, then her brothers; gelded and sold (if they survived it), they would earn back the money Dace had spent on Avarach's virginity.

Queeneyes smoothed sweaty palms down her thin white linen robe and thought she understood how it would be. But she was wrong.

He was perfumed and elegant and knew what he was about; an elemental contract, loveless as a pawnshop. But he was not angry with her, and gave her instructions it was impossible to mistake. And in the ludicrous heave and clutch of embrangled bodies, she felt the Sight forsake her in an uprush of flight — all bright possibility battered to earth and remade in clay; the might-have-beens savaged from her waking mind, leaving behind them only the knowledge of what she had lost.

And what she had gained.

The Choosers came to the city of Choirdip on a bright spring day when the sun shone white and rain had washed the air to gleaming purity. They came in pomp and panoply, a feast for all the senses, and established themselves in the Market Square where any child who dared might come to them, to gaze into their bowl of cloudy crystal and be Chosen.

Many came, to dare and risk and hope, but the child Avarach was not among them. The hero Queeneyes was in a back room at Mother Dace's, saving the world.

❧

Artwork by SandraTempleton

ELUKI BES SHAHAR is the author of three sf novels and several other short stories set in Crownland. Two Crownland stories have appeared in *Dragon Magazine*, one in issue 13 of *FANTASY Magazine*, and one in **SWORD & SORCERESS 8** (the story there also featured the character Coelli Cheyne). She hopes someday to write a Crownland tale "longer than 2500 words". DAW recently published two of her sf novels, **HELLFLOWER** and its sequel **DARKTRADERS**. She also writes Regency novels as "Rosemary Edgehill"; her fourth novel, **FLEETING FANCY**, is from St. Martin's Press.

SANDRA TEMPLETON, a freelance illustrator who lives near Kansas City with her husband and teenage daughter, has worked as a courtoom illustrator for a TV station, as a package designer, and for firms such as Hallmark Cards and major advertising agencies — her clients have included Swanson's and Ralston Purina. She is a member of the New York Society of Illustrators (I guess you don't have to live in New York to join!)

# *Marion Zimmer Bradley* Talks To Writers:
## Convenient Earthquake

I am able to use form rejection letters (with a few added personal comments) because most of my rejected manuscripts fall into a few often-repeated categories of inadequacies. "Convenient earthquake" is one of my more frequently used rejection letters. In it, I state that "I couldn't care less whether your characters live and do well, or whether they were all wiped out on the last page by a convenient earthquake."

I probably ought to explain why I use that particular expression. During my first job reading manuscripts professionally for a science fiction/fantasy publisher, I had to read a longish novel which, though not exceptional, was at least well enough written to hold my interest at a minimal level. But it seemed to have no fantasy or science fiction elements; the book dealt mostly with young urban professionals who smoked marijuana, drank, gambled, had indiscriminate love affairs, and engaged in other unwise, questionably ethical, and largely immoral pursuits. I read more and more, not really caring what happened, but trying to figure out why on earth the writer called this thing fantasy or science fiction — and why he was bothering to write it at all. As nearly as I could tell, it read like continuity for a soap opera of the sleazier kind. I was certain Don Wollheim wouldn't want to publish it, and I knew I was wasting my time, but I went on reading out of perverse curiosity.

Earlier in my slush-inspecting, I had seen and discarded novels of the sea and of big city detectives, as being so far away from Ace's readership that I should not waste my time and eyesight trying to read them. But I kept on with this one, doggedly searching for the faintest glimmer of magic or otherworldliness; and especially, I was looking for a reason to like, dislike, or even remotely care about the characters.

Then, finally, I arrived at the last page. *Aha*, I thought, maybe now I'll find out why this would-be writer considered this thing worth trying to publish.

The answer, such as it was, was on the last page — 246 or some such. The writer stated that the people in the novel, without exception, were so evil and wicked that the devil came along to destroy them all with an earthquake. There it was: a convenient cop-out that allowed the writer to end (finally!) the pedestrian lives of his cardboard characters. The ending had nothing whatsoever to do with the rest of the book; and even if it had been pertinent, I wouldn't have lamented (or cheered) the characters' demise. Frankly, my dears, I didn't give a damn.

And since that day — about seventeen years ago — I have remembered and invoked that very convenient earthquake when I am reading a story about characters who are so expendable, interchangeable, or completely forgettable that I find myself wishing fervently for any old catastrophe to put them (and me) out of our misery. And this is true even if the story *is* fantasy.

OK, I want memorable characters; what does that mean? First of all, it means that each character should have a different and distinct personality. Give the reader a clear picture of what Grymfrizzl looks like, what her strengths, flaws, and idiosyncracies are, and how she reacts to particular situations. It helps to place the character into historical, familial, and situational context so the reader knows why the character finds his fanny in the proverbial bear trap. It's the details that make a character memorable - the quirks, if you will. Every real person has them; every character should, too.

Second, the reader needs a reason to care what happens to the characters. One of the commonest devices used to hook readers is to place ordinary (but memorable) people into extraordinary circumstances; the story develops around their ability or inability to cope with them. A related theme uses extraordinary people or beings (those with supernatural/superhuman) gifts or powers who must struggle against each other, or who must cope with clever and resourceful ordinary beings who are out to steal their powers, kill them, or whatever.

Third, the reader must see the story through someone's eyes — the writer's or a character's. Viewpoint is very important; when you write from a hero's point of view, you must see through the hero's eyes and feel as the hero feels. When you write from the author's point of view, you must not only know how the hero sees and feels the world, but you must see the hero himself clearly. The trick is to make the reader feel intimately acquainted with the character, as though that character - no matter how fanciful or fantastic - were a real person or being. Again, detail does the trick. What is noticeable/striking/memorable/irritating about a given character? How do other characters react to these traits?

It's not enough simply to have your characters do things and be places. They have to feel, react, dress, behave, walk, growl, and scheme. When they do, they'll leap straight off the page and into your reader's mind and heart. And your reader will finish the story eagerly, without hoping for a convenient earthquake to hasten the process.

*— Marion Zimmer Bradley*

***Editor's Note:*** *If you have any suggestions about how to make characters interesting and memorable, please send them to us, c/o Writers Talk Back!*

# Writers Talk Back

**CAN YOU RESELL A STORY?**
**Chris Nelling**, Mercersburg, PA

Say I have a story published in a magazine that buys "one time rights", and a year or so later new ideas for the same story pop up and I rewrite it, expanding it considerably (heaven forbid, I might even write a novel). Do I need permission from the first publisher? And if it does become a novel...should I tell its potential publisher that parts of it have been published as short stories? And what about using the same character in other stories?

*You do not need permission from the first publisher to resell a story. Once they have published it (and you DO have to wait for actual publication of the magazine or anthology), the rights revert to you. And yes, you should definitely tell the second publisher, even if you've done substantial rewriting or turned the story into a novel. Generally, a notice on the copyright page will say something like, "A portion of this novel appeared as a short story in* SWORD & SORCERESS III, *copyright 1986 by Elisabeth Waters."*

*There should be no problem with using the same character in other stories; but always read your contracts carefully, and when in doubt, ask! — MZB*

**KEEPING REJECTION IN PROPORTION**
**Robyn McGrew**, Las Vegas, NV

What is the average ratio of rejection slips vs. stories sent?...I have written forty stories [since] 4-29-91 and have thus far sold two. I would like to think I'm doing well; am I?

My second question is [about] growing as a writer. I thought it was part of the process to re-read your stories when they come back, using the editorial comments if any, and improving upon them before sending the story to another market. Am I wrong, or should you not bring your stories up to your current writing ability?

*Raul, who processes the manuscripts and rejection slips, tells me we keep about one out of forty unsolicited manuscripts. (I thought it was more like one out of fifteen, but I guess I'm an optimist.) Many more than this are worthy of print, but we just don't have the space for them; that's why we have a "no-fault" rejection letter. So yes, Robyn, you're doing fine.*

*What you do with rejected stories has mostly to do with how you wish to spend your own precious writing time — writing new stories, or rewriting old ones. Rewriting a trite or commonplace story won't get you very far; but polishing a diamond in the rough may bring great rewards. The choice is yours. — MZB*

**EXCELLENCE OR ELITISM? ANOTHER VIEW**
**Bronwyn Elko**, Vancouver, BC

As a woman who has worked as a counselor in a feminist-oriented transition home, I have little sympathy for those [people] who whine about "too much rejection". While I'll grant it's true that most women have been subjected to "unfair prejudice" within the work force and social milieu, there have always been women for whom this disadvantage has served as a force which spurred them on to greater heights. Indeed, most women I know have done exactly as they pleased, myself included. At one point in my life this meant living alone eighty miles south of the Arctic Circle with my three-year-old daughter. Obviously, in order to survive a harsh winter, one requires *excellent* wilderness skills...Nature is indifferent to our sex and teaches us, rather severely, to always do our very best — the reward being survival.

The same applies to writing and to life. It's tough out there. But this should not be surprising because writing is about life; the most outrageous fantasy is still about what *happens to people.* Writers like Ursula LeGuin, Andre Norton, Anne Rice, and others know that in order to give life to their stories they have got to write tough, without pulling any punches...It took years of hard work to achieve their goals. They got what their talent and perseverance deserves...

As a woman approaching the middle of the road in life, and the beginning of my writing career, I desire to be published for the following reasons: excellence, Excellence, and EXCELLENCE.

*...amen, Amen, and AMEN! — MZB*

**WHY ARE YOU A WRITER?**
**Lyn McConchie**, New Zealand

I was stunned to read the letter [in issue #15]...Hasn't this writer learned yet that it's up to the Editor to buy which stories they prefer? Sure, there are some times you want to take an editor by the throat and shake.... But there's a better way. **IF** you're so certain your story was better, someone else will buy it. You can then sit back and sneer in your armchair that they didn't know a good story when they saw it. Choices are subjective. Besides which, here in our writers' group (all 28 of us) we have a saying — "if you can't handle rejection, why are you a writer?" Don't waste your time and cash writing furious letters to the poor editor. Use that time to write another story and the cash to post it. Being a writer is about persistence, refusal to take no for an answer, but that isn't a reason to attack the Editor. Just keep submitting stories quietly. One day you may even sell one. That's a lot of balm for wounded feelings...I'd estimate I get ten rejections to every acceptance, that's around 300 in the last couple of years (plus 32 sales). I could already paper a small room. Am I put off? Hell no, not with 32 acceptances!

*I couldn't have said it better myself! —MZB*

**FORSOOTH AND GADZOOKS**
**Mary Anne Landers** (who writes as Rima Saret), Russellville, AR

Stop me if you've already received a zillion letters about this, but when you wrote, "When thou givest false pronouns, they taketh away from your story — if thou catchest my meaning", you should have written "...they take away...". As any book on Middle and Early Modern English can tell you, the *-eth* form went on the end of regular verbs in the present indicative third person *singular.* The plural was the same as it is nowadays.

Since this error occurs in an editorial on incorrect archaic English grammar used by modern writers, perhaps you inserted it deliberately in order to find out whether any reader would catch it. Well, at least one did!

*Thanks, Mary Anne; yours is the only letter on this subject that we've received — and yes, I erred deliberately! — MZB*

*Now you know the* **real** *reason to study grammar: so you can appreciate your editor's jokes! — REH*

Artwork by Dameon Willich

# The Dream Web

## by Lynn Coulter

Ojuba could not sleep. Night after night she soaked in baths filled with fragrant oils swirling atop steaming water. Night after night she plumped up downy pillows for her head and propped her windows open to the cold air blowing out of the mountains into her small village near Nepal. And still she could not sleep.

It was not that Ojuba could not fall asleep. It was that her dreams woke her up. Since childhood, she had been tormented by nightmares. Now Ojuba was a grown woman and soon to be married to one of the finest men in the village.

"What am I to do?" Ojuba said to herself in the middle of yet another miserable night. "My new husband will not want a wife who tosses and kicks and shouts in her sleep." She sat on the edge of her bed. In the midst of a dream she had knocked over a water pitcher on a low table. Now she watched a dark water stain spread across the rug on her bedroom floor. Ojuba walked over to the window. In the city below, the lamps at the merchants' bazaar had almost flickered out. Tomorrow, Ojuba thought. Tomorrow I will go down to the merchants' bazaar and see if I can buy myself some sleep.

Ojuba plundered through the goods at the bazaar like a burglar in a rich man's house at midnight. She sifted through strands of polished beads, unrolled bolts of scarlet cloth embroidered with gold, and fingered small birds and frogs chiseled out of onyx and ivory and green marble.

"Help you, lady?" asked the merchant whose tent this was. He bowed to her, an ostrich plume of his turban sweeping the dirt around his bare feet.

"I'm looking," said Ojuba. "I don't know exactly what I need. But it must be something to help me sleep. Maybe you have some sweet spices for anointing a pillow?"

The merchant frowned. He rummaged through his wares, peering down the skinny necks of jars and vases on his tables. "No, no spices for sale today. Maybe some picture books, something pretty to look at until sleep comes?"

Ojuba flipped the gilt-edged pages of the leather volumes he handed her. "No, I am able to fall asleep. But I have horrible nightmares. I need something to bring pleasant dreams."

"Ah," said the merchant. "You have terrors in the night. It is a common thing. I have small children who sometimes awaken from bad dreams."

"Do you?" asked Ojuba eagerly. "And how do you chase away their bad dreams?"

The merchant shrugged. "They are children, lady. They can be rocked and sung to and held until sleep returns. And when they are safe in their mother's arms, they forget and rest in sleep again. For adults, it is not always easy to dream pretty dreams."

Ojuba sighed. "Yes, I know. I have suffered all my twenty years." She looked around. A mirror framed in peacock feathers hung from the corner of the merchant's tent, tilted so that his customers could admire the drape of his fringed shawls or the colors of his saris. But Ojuba saw only her own sad face, a pale oval smudged with fatigue under dark brown eyes. "I sleep, but I do not rest. Who could, with the phantoms and fears that chase me around all night?"

The merchant stood watching her, pulling on his lower lip. He seemed to be looking her over, measuring her against an invisible scale. "Lady," he said, "there is something old here that might help you. I make no guarantee for it, understand!"

Ojuba clasped his big hand in both of her small, cold ones. "I am desperate. I have tried everything! I have been to doctors and priests and old wives whose powers are legendary. Nothing helps me. Now I am soon to wed. My poor husband-to-be will suffer, too. He will not want a wife who tosses and turns and cries out in her sleep, and then awakens to drag herself through another tired day. Whatever you may have, I'll try. Only help me!"

The merchant put his fingers across his lips to shush her. Looking up and down the aisles until he was satisfied no one was watching, he pulled Ojuba inside his tent. There he dragged out a box covered by a worn blanket. Slowly he removed the contents.

Ojuba brushed aside a moth that flew out of the box, startled to find its sleep suddenly disturbed. The merchant dug deeper until he found a brocade bag tied with a tasselled cord. Opening it, he shook out what seemed to be a wisp of antique lace rolled into a ball.

"Lady," he said. "This was traded to me long, long ago. An old crone gave it to me in exchange for some trinket she fancied. I have never used it. She called it a dream web and claimed it had the powers of wondrous dreams."

Gently he unrolled the fragile ball. In the dark tent Ojuba's eyes focused slowly. It was impossible to tell whether the material was a piece of fine lace or some sturdy spider's web, spun in a pattern as intricate as the snowflakes in the mountains that Ojuba had heard about but never seen.

"How does it work?" she whispered.

"The old woman told me that the one who desires pleasant dreams stretches it across the bedposts of her bed. Then she goes to bed as usual. In the night, the dream web spins beautiful dreams for the dreamer."

"And how much is this web?"

The merchant raked out a figure in the sand floor of his tent.

"Outrageous!" Ojuba cried.

"It is worth more," the merchant said. "That is why I hide it from thieves. I will make a deal for you, lady. If the dream web does not bring you pleasant dreams, return it to me. I will give you your money back or you may have the pick of my wares. Fair?"

Ojuba hesitated. She glanced outside the tent. Already the sun's yolk had split and was staining the horizon with a blazing red sunset. Soon she would lie down to sleep. And her demons would dance again.

"Done," she said.

That night Ojuba tossed uneasily upon her pallet. Overhead the web stretched from bedpost to bedpost. In the flickering light from the oil lamp, the web's shadow danced on her bedroom wall. For all its delicate beauty, it frightened Ojuba. She could imagine a spider in its center, angry at being disturbed.

Ojuba trimmed the lamp's wick, and darkness filled the room. She stretched her arms over her head, palms toward the ceiling. Her fingertips touched the sticky surface of the dream web.

Suddenly Ojuba was asleep and dreaming that she was sailing. Out of the desert in which she lived rose an ocean of blue water. Gulls cawed overhead, diving into frothy waves to spear silver-finned fish. The palm trees of her desert home dropped their harvest of dates and suddenly grew a crop of coconuts. Then the sand around the palms shifted until islands arose out of the midst of the ocean.

Ojuba saw she was standing on the deck of a clipper ship. Overhead a white sail puffed with wind, skimming the ship along. Ojuba gasped. The billowing sail atop the mast was the dream web, stretched to an enormous breadth and height.

On a landing above her, at the bow of the ship, stood a tall, muscular man clad in an unbuttoned shirt and baggy trousers of faded brown that were stuffed into the tops of leather boots. He lowered a spyglass from his eye to stare at Ojuba.

"Well?" said he.

Ojuba stood perfectly still.

"Are you going to climb up and take a look?" he asked, holding out the spyglass.

Ojuba looked down at her nightgown and bare feet. He did not seem to notice anything amiss. "Yes, I suppose I will," she said.

Ojuba joined him and scanned the horizon with the glass. An island with sand as white as sugar loomed ahead. "Is that our destination?" she asked.

The man threw back his black curly hair and laughed heartily. Ojuba saw one gold tooth flash in the sunlight. For a moment he looked suspiciously like her fiance, although he was half-hidden under a curly mane and an equally black and curly beard. "A fine pirate's wife you are!" he cried. "And you're the one who's been nagging me to take you to the spice islands all these months!"

"Wife? I'm your wife?" Ojuba felt a dizziness that had nothing to do with the height to which she had just climbed.

The pirate put one beefy hand behind her head and pulled her close for a brief, hard kiss. "You're the sea-king's daughter, I'd swear it. I'd sail across an ocean for any trifle your heart might fancy, and you know it. What will it be on this trip? Perfume? Spices and herbs for your pantry? Only name it."

Ojuba could not speak. Just then a scrawny sailor shouted down from the

Artwork by Dameon Willich

crow's nest over their heads. "Cap'n," he cried, "Blue sails to starboard!"

Ojuba asked, "Blue sails? What does that mean?"

"Trouble," the captain answered tersely. "That's the color of the Queen's fleet. They've come to pay us back for — " His answer was cut off by a volley of cannon fire. Ojuba covered her head with her hands and crouched under a corner of the dream-sail as smoke rolled across the deck and shells pounded the water around the hull.

"Steady, men!" the captain shouted. "Hold your course and load the cannon to return fire!" For what seemed like an eternity the ships exchanged their clumsy fire. But the sail on the pirate captain's ship, the dream web-sail, caught a strong wind and billowed ahead. Skillfully the pirate's ship outran their enemies. The ship sailed around a point on the island and into a calm cove.

The pirate captain ordered his crew to drop anchor. "Are you mad?" Ojuba asked. "They'll be upon us in minutes."

The pirate captain stepped onto a rope ladder slung over the side of the ship, then began to climb down to a rowboat below. "Give me your hand," he ordered. "We'll ferry over to the island. The Blues will give us up, to be sure. They'll think we've sailed ahead to reload and will be waiting here for them, ready to fire dead-on. They'll abandon the chase today."

Ojuba timidly took his hand and climbed into the rowboat. In moments the sailors had ferried them to shore and left them alone.

Ojuba stood on the shore, puzzled. To be sure, this was not a peaceful dream. But the excitement, the energy of it all! She twisted her toes in the cool, damp sand. All around them the ocean foamed and surged with life and adventure. And this island was surely paradise. She opened her mouth, ready to ask questions and tell the pirate what strange fate had brought her here. But before she could speak, the pirate scooped her up in his arms and carried her to a shady spot beneath a shaggy-barked palm tree.

"It's here we'll open our treasure chest," he told her.

"Treasure chest?" Ojuba said. "You have a treasure chest?"

Again he laughed his gold-toothed laugh. "As if you have forgotten. It's the chest I found on Andutia Island. I promised I'd let you open it as a gift on our wedding anniversary. Legend says it was jammed full of rubies, you know, when an old pirate king buried it."

From the pocket of his baggy trousers he produced a rusty chest as small as a music box on a lady's table. He thrust the blade of his knife under the lock. The blade snapped, and the pirate muttered angrily. He found a rock and began to pound upon the lock. The clasp bent and broke away. "Ah," he said, satisfied. He lifted the lid.

Ojuba bent over the little chest with excitement. But just beyond the shore a movement of white caught her eye. A deck hand had untied the rope holding the dream web to the mast and was tying it down in preparation for anchoring overnight. As he loosened the rope the dream web collapsed and fell toward the deck. "Oh, no," Ojuba cried, but it was too late. The white sail crumpled. The pirate froze, his gold tooth disappearing in the rapidly fading light. The little chest fell from his hands. Ojuba caught just a glimmer of a red gem rolling away into the damp sand as her dream faded into

nothingness and she opened her eyes to the dawn.

"You told me this web brought pleasant dreams," Ojuba scolded the merchant. "I had a dream last night that was so real, so vivid — I did not rest at all."

"Was it a bad dream?" asked the merchant meekly. He had removed his turban in deference to Ojuba's anger and was fingering the ostrich plume nervously.

"No, it wasn't a bad dream. It was — exciting. Quite an adventure, really. But not restful. How can anyone get a decent night's sleep when their dreams are full of battles and pirates' treasure chests and the like?"

The merchant stopped twisting his headpiece. "Pirates?"

"Yes, pirates. Now I am supposed to wed in a week. I must get some rest. This isn't solving my problem." Ojuba folded her arms across her chest and patted her sandal-clad foot nervously.

The merchant scratched his jaw. "Perhaps you should give it one more try. The dream web hasn't been used for many years. It probably needed to be broken in before it could give good service. Try it once more, dear lady. One more try. It if does not satisfy, I will take it back, I promise."

Ojuba considered this. "I suppose I can try again. After all, nothing else has helped me. What else is there, after this?"

Once more Ojuba lay down to sleep underneath the dream web. The instant she closed her eyes she found herself in a large kitchen. A fire blazed cheerily at a stone hearth, and a pot of stew, smelling of carrots and potatoes and beef, simmered above the fire. Ojuba felt herself wiping her hands to clean them of sticky dough. She looked down. She was clad in a large, white bib apron — the dream web.

"Well, my darling, have we some supper for the table yet?" Ojuba looked up, startled. It was the pirate again — or was it her betrothed? — striding across the room. He held a small child in the crook of each arm.

Ojuba glanced around her. She had been baking, it seemed. A pan of biscuits sat on the table in front of her.

The pirate put the children down. "Mother," the little girl cried. She ran to Ojuba and wrapped her arms around her, burying her face in the soft, deep folds of the apron-web. "Mother, make Daddy tell us a bedtime story," she begged.

Ojuba patted the child's hair with floury hands. "Of — of course I will, dearest. Only go and set the table for us just now, will you?"

The two children took plates from the pantry and, pushing each other along, ran to set the table. Ojuba watched her pirate, who was tasting the stew with a long wooden spoon.

"Needs more salt, I think," he said. "Would you like a taste?"

Ojuba shook her head.

"Well, my dear," the pirate continued. He fingered a yellow flower sitting in a glass of water on the window sill. "Spring is coming, and that means it'll soon be time to sail again. Will you be coming with me on this next trip?"

Ojuba found her voice. "Where — where will you be going?"

"I thought I'd take you home, dearest. A trip back over the sea and we'll cross the mountains to your village. Would you like to see your family again?"

Ojuba rubbed her forehead. "How long is it I've been gone?"

"Why, since we married these ten years ago. I thought you might like to see your uncle again."

Ojuba sat down on a stool. "My uncle," she mused. "He has been my only family for years. My parents died when I was so young. I really don't have any family."

The pirate stood in front of her and put both hands on her shoulders. "Why, I should think your children and husband are family enough. And we're not rich, but we're respectable now."

"Now?"

"Aye, I've earned respectability since I've renounced my wild ways and become a proper businessman. 'Twas never my nature to be a staid and stolid citizen of any land, but as long as I've a ship to pilot and a new trade route to explore, I'm happy. Can you say as much?"

He looked into Ojuba's face. In the flickering firelight, Ojuba thought she could see her beloved's face. Suddenly the children burst into the room, arguing between themselves who should set the glasses upon the table.

"Children, stop it," Ojuba cried. "I can scarcely think!" The little girl hid behind her mother's skirt, peeking out at her brother. The boy snatched at his sister's pigtails. He grasped something in his hand and yanked.

"Oh, no," Ojuba said, feeling the dream-apron slipping away from her waist. The boy, astonished, looked first at the apron string he held in one hand and then at the vanishing figure before him. Ojuba tried desperately to re-tie the apron, but it was too late. It fell across her feet and she awoke.

Artwork by Dameon Willich

The bazaar merchant removed his turban as he entered the house where the wedding was to take place. A woman led him to the chamber where Ojuba was making her final preparations before the ceremony.

"Lady," he said, "I am very much surprised that you would invite me on your wedding day. But I am very honored," he hastened to add.

Ojuba smiled and took his hands. "Merchant, I wanted to tell you that your sale is final now. I am satisfied with the claims you made for the dream web and will keep the merchandise."

The little merchant sighed, relieved. "I must confess, lady, that I had feared I was called here to give you your money back."

"No, indeed," said Ojuba. She was radiant, clad in her wedding gown. She sat before an oval mirror, rolling her black hair into a coil atop her head. "I have only pleasant dreams these days. In fact, I have learned quite a lot about myself from the dream web."

"Oh?" asked the merchant. He was watching the wedding guests enter through the door just beyond them. Perhaps he could convince some of them, relaxed by the wedding feast and wine, to shop at his stall, especially if he had the bride's recommendation.

"Yes," Ojuba said. She caught up a loose strand of hair with an ivory hairpin. Then she turned to look at him. "I think I had bad dreams because I have not had a happy life. Today I begin a new life. My husband tells me that he wants to go to sea and take me with him. Is that not exciting?"

The merchant looked at her beautiful face, her dark eyes glowing. "Indeed, Lady, the sea is a most wondrous thing. And your dreams are pleasant now?"

"Actually, I do not dream at all now. Rather, I should say that I do my dreaming when I am awake. I dream of adventure, and love, and home. It is a good thing, to have a dream in one's life."

"Yes, lady," said the merchant. "It is a good thing."

Ojuba put the dream web over her head and draped it across her face.

"It makes a lovely veil, lady," said the merchant. And he gave her his arm as she walked through the house to join her groom.

❧

LYNN COULTER has sold several stories to *FANTASY Magazine*, but this is the first (I think) which has seen print. Two others will appear in future issues.

DAMEON WILLICH was one of the principals of the Northern Lights, an influential Seattle-based artist's group.


# BACK ISSUES

___ Issue #1 (Summer 1988) – *Imagination and Reason* - Poul Anderson.
*The Skycastle* - cover story by Bruce D. Arthurs; cover art by George Barr. *The Final Bet* - Marion Zimmer Bradley.
*Final Exam* - Jennifer Roberson.

___ Issue #2 (Fall 1988) – *The Hitchhiker* - Jayge Carr.
*Bone Serai* - cover story by Susan Shwartz; cover art by George Barr.

___ Issue #3 (Winter, 1989) *** WE FOUND A BUNCH OF THESE IN STORAGE — THEY'RE NOT SOLD OUT AFTER ALL!!! NOT YET....***
*The Adinkra Cloth* (a Nebula finalist!) - Mary C. Aldridge. *Falling Apart* - Larry Hodges.
*A Glassmaker's Courage* - cover story by M. Coleman Easton & Phyllis Ann Karr; cover art by Frank Kelly Freas.

Issue #4 **SOLD OUT** (Really.)

___ Issue #5 (Summer, 1989). "The Dragon Issue"
*Do Virgins Taste Better?* - Deborah Millitello. *Dragon Three Two Niner* - Peter L. Manly.
*The Dragon, the Unicorn and the Teddy Bear* - Phyllis Ann Karr. Cover art by George Barr.

___ Issue #6 (Fall, 1989)– *Nightside* - Mercedes Lackey.
*Aventura* - Jacqueline Lichtenberg. *The Book of Souls* - cover story by Jason Van Hollander; Chesley-Award-winning cover art by Frank Kelly Freas and Laura Brodian Kelly-Freas.

___ Issue #7 (Winter 1990) – *Daughter of the Oak* - David M. Shea.
*Kill Dance* - Mary A. Turzillo. *The Hall of the Winter Folk* - cover story by Stephen C. Fisher. Cover art by George Barr.

___ Issue #8 (Spring 1990) "Science-Fiction-Fantasy" Issue
*Change* - cover story by Jo Clayton; cover art by James Balkovek.
*A Swim with a Shark* - Robert Collins. *Julio's Rock* - Barbara Rosen.

___ Issue #9 (Summer 1990) "Short-Short" Issue
40 stories, PLUS articles! Short-shorts by Lackey, MZB, Paxson, Hodges, Schweitzer, Waters, Rosen, Huebner, and a host of others!

___ Issue #10 (Fall 1990) – *A Dollar for your Soul* - Earl Vickers. *Satanic, Versus...* - Mercedes Lackey.
*What a Wizard Does* - Janet Kagan. *Vassilissa the Fair* - cover story by Micole Sudberg. Cover art by James Balkovek.

___ Issue #11 (Winter 1991) – *Brontharn* - cover story and cover art by George Barr.
*Be It Ever So Humble* –Tanya Huff. *Footsteps* - Marion Zimmer Bradley.
*The Robber Girl, the Sea Witch, and the Little Mermaid's Voice* - Phyllis Ann Karr.

___ Issue #12 (Spring 1991) – *The Connecticut Eskimo* by Madeleine L'Engle; cover art by George Barr.
*Yorkshire Luck* - Bob Liddil. *Sunrise* - Leslie Ann Miller. *The Girl* - Donald Backman.

___ Issue #13 (Summer 1991) – *Haut-Clare* - cover story by eluki bes shahar; cover art by Frank Kelly Freas.
*According To Custom* - G.E. Gaines. *Flight Of Fancy* - Morgan Noel. *On Solid Ground* - Cindy Hughes.

___ Issue #14 (Fall 1991) – *Black Ribbon* - cover story by Dawn Albright; cover art by Gail Butler.
*The Tengu's Scroll* - Dana Kramer-Rolls. *Guardian* - Bunnie Bessel. *The Wuzzles* - Marion Zimmer Bradley.

___ Issue #15 (Winter 1991) – *Issue in honor of Fritz Leiber*. Cover art by David Cherry.
*Queen of Sumer Forests* - Isabel Cole, *To Be the Best* - Margarita Serbia, *All's Fair* - G.E. Gaines.

___ Issue #16 (Spring-Summer 1992) – *Never look at a Gift Sword in the Horse's Mouth* - Jennifer Roberson; Alan Gutierrez cover.
*The Contract* - Isabel Cole. *Lessons in the Dark* - Sandra C. Morrese. Interview with Lois McMaster Bujold.

___ Issue #17 (Fall 1992) – *Pandemonium* - Sue Young Wilson; George Barr cover.
*The White Snake* - Mara Grey. *Riddle Trial* - Deborah Burros. Interview with Mike Resnick.

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# The Goddess Who Dreamed of Pomegranates

The sand skittered across her crumbling toes, gusted over her stone back. One arm had fallen to the wind, her nose was beginning to scale, and a rock had cracked her kneecap. If she allowed the sand to bury her as it buried the artifacts of her people, her statue would last longer. But she didn't want that. Someday, somehow, her stone skull would split and she would escape.

Centuries ago she found the statue. Though mortal small, it was perfect in shape, as if the woman who had made it had seen her, or as if some witch had magically produced her body in sand for the woman to copy. Faithful even to the mole on her shoulder, to the dimple in her buttock, the statue was her, the Goddess Maruta, naked and flawless. How could she resist?

Invisible, she had drifted to the village and inspected the idol. She circled it, sniffed it, stroked it, watched over it at night, and all the time she wondered, how would it feel from the inside? How would it be to let herself be held up, cradled at every joint? Could the statue do that for her? She had to find out, so she insinuated her Goddess self inside.

Ah. Cool quiet, restful. She could still hear, but the sounds were muted; still see, but the colors had faded. The statue offered her peace. She would visit often.

But as she was about to leave, she heard a crashing of drums and feet. A woman chanted an invocation. The statue seemed to shrink, to press against her soul, and Maruta couldn't breathe. Frightened, Maruta pushed against the stone, but all the cracks were sealed and she couldn't escape.

Where had the mortals learned such spells? And what was that odor? Cedar? Burnt over an open fire? Maruta howled, for the stench weakened her.

Furious, she rocked against her cage. Her statue teetered and would have fallen, but the people caught it and held it until their witch could weave a spell to bind her still and stable forever. Why had they done this? Why?

She swept their souls, listened to their hearts, read their words, and learned. So. They feared earthquakes, fires, typhoons. All the miseries of earth and storm, they wished them gone. Well, she was a weather goddess. She could do those things. But did they really think she would? Risk the balance of her planet to save a few mortal lives? Impossible.

But then she felt it, first a stiffening in her back, then a clamping of her shoulders. She felt the witch's magic creep up her neck, stronger now, fiercer. Not content with caging Maruta's body, the witch was trying to cage Maruta's will. She had gone too far.

Fools, mortal fools. No, Maruta couldn't fight the magic, but she could certainly fight the witch. With a shriek of power and rage, she struck the witch dead with lightning. Maruta's limbs, her very spine remained rigid as stone, but at least her will was free, her skull open to the sun. Now, if she could only crack the statue's skull...

But she could not. Not even her lightning bolts could smash that stone, for

by Barbara Stevens Graybeal

Artwork by Margaret Organ Kean

nothing of her own could pierce their magic. Only a mortal could help her now and these mortals were not moving. Even the children had stopped playing. Maruta listened, holding her breath, and the wind itself was still.

Then the village burst with voices. The people began to argue.

"What have we done?"

"It was your fault."

"No, yours."

"Why did we listen?"

"What do we do now?"

"Yes, what do we do now?"

Maruta waited to find out.

"A gift, perhaps," said one.

Yes, a gift, a gift. But what did they have? What could they offer that would appease a Goddess?

"Oh, here, look," cried a girl. Her yellow gown shimmered in the sunlight as she reached into a pomegranate tree, snapped a fruit from a branch, and tossed it into the fire. Another copied her, then another, until the tangy odor of sizzling pomegranates obscured the resin of the cedar.

It was lovely, sweet, and it calmed Maruta. Yet she was sad.

"You might have thought to free me," she said, but no one heard her.

Instead, they danced, sang, begged her forgiveness, and the pomegranates sparked into the night. The acrid fruit reminded Maruta of her home, of her sisters, of her pomegranate garden. When her people went into their huts and slept, Maruta stayed awake, listening to her sisters sing, to their feet pounding as they danced above her in their world of fountains, and Maruta keened. She tried to flee, tried to squeeze her soul so she could force her way through holes that weren't there. But the binding spell was powerful and she gave up, exhausted.

That night, and for many nights after, the seas quaked, the winds stormed, the skies opened wounds and howled. The land for miles around was devastated, but Maruta spared her people, for there was still a chance that one would set her free.

None ever did.

Years passed, decades, and still Maruta stood as though lifeless in her cage. Her sisters had come and gone, trying tricks and spells, but they, too, were powerless against the mortal magic. Soon they wearied of the effort and went home. Yes, they sang to her each night, but they would not return to touch her and Maruta could not move to embrace them. Her body ached with anger, so she turned on her people for revenge. She flooded their valleys, cursed them with drought, struck their straw huts flat with wind and lightning, and they hid and cried and begged forgiveness until she wearied of rage, and she left her people alone. The quiet was like a blessing to them, and they created a new legend around her. Priestesses offered her rosemary and blessed thistle and young men stroked her, caressed her. Their touch soothed her skin and gave her pleasure. And, because it appeased her before, the villagers burnt pomegranate seeds on the pyres of their dead until, eventually, pomegranates came to mean death, though the juice was also dribbled in a newborn's mouth.

Foolish mortals, Maruta thought, to so confuse death and life.

But that was long, long ago. Her people had died of plague, deformity, wars. The village crumbled. Maruta grew lazy. She allowed the winds to change until no rains came off the ocean and the endless sun killed trees, parched rivers, blew sand and salt over the rotting boards and hides that remained, until everything her people had built, everything they'd made, was hidden. Everything but her. Endlessly she swept the harsh sands from her body, leaving her rocky form open to the sun, for only that way could she hear her sisters' feet as they danced. It seemed she could remember the gold shimmer of sunlight on the water droplets and the scent of cypress branches. Or had the cypress been here, in this village? She didn't know. It was long ago and she was bored.

In her boredom, she spread her vision and searched the hills nearby. She struggled and pushed for years until finally she managed to see: desolation, quiet. Where had the people gone? When one died out, did they all die out, like lightning bugs come frost?

But no, wait, what was this? Over the mountains there was a valley, green, honey-scented, and in it lived people. People! Black, brown, some with hints of grey, but all with the long brow, the sharp chin, of her own people. Yet Maruta could not be sure, so she waited. Waited to see girls in yellow plant seed in a pomegranate grove; waited to see an old woman rise before the tribe, story stick in one hand, cedar flame in the other. Yes, these people were hers. Maruta could call to them. They would listen.

Into their valley she sent storms such as there had never been. Tornados whipped the trees from the ground, rains gushed down the mountain, and hailstones bruised the people when they went outside. Yet every night the world grew quiet and Maruta blew a gentle wind through the old woman's hut so the woman might recognize her.

And, finally, she did.

She bolted from her hut one morning and stomped across the clearing, an axe clutched in one hand. A young man staggered after her, stumbling over broken branches in his haste. At the foothills, he caught up with her, wrested the axe away and threw it down. He argued with her, pleaded, begged, and from the doorways of the other huts, faces peered and a few villagers spoke, but not one ventured outside.

Through it all, the woman was silent, and when the man stopped speaking, she bent down, picked up the axe, and walked on.

Stuttering, arms thrashing, the man dashed after her. He reached to grab the axe again, but the woman's face when she turned to him was so bitter that Maruta was not surprised when the young man cringed away.

The woman spoke two words, then turned and climbed into the mountains.

The young man hesitated, then scurried after her.

Maruta thrilled. Someone was coming. And not just anyone, but a woman with an axe.

Yet it seemed forever before they reached her. Through the long day, Maruta watched them clamber up the rocks. The man never ceased his chatter and the woman never answered. He reached once more for the axe, but the woman hissed at him, and he turned away, raising his arms to the skies as if to call Maruta herself down to help.

But Maruta could not move. Not yet.

It was another day, then two more, before they finally reached the salty dunes where Maruta dwelled.

"Go to her, yes," Maruta heard the man say even before she could see him. "Worship her, offer her gifts, anything, but if she knows you mean to kill her..."

The woman laughed, a biting laugh that made Maruta shiver. So cold, this small creature. So angry cold. "Do you think, truly, that I can kill a Goddess?" she asked. The mortals reached the crest of the largest dune and Maruta saw them tramp across the sands, stumbling in their haste. "If you think so, boy, then you are a fool."

"But she will destroy you, Mother. If

Artwork by Margaret Organ Kean

she knows your intent..."

"Ayyah!" the woman howled. "Enough!" She hurled the axe into the sand and whirled on the man, hands outstretched and curled into claws. "For four days I have listened to you. For four days I have been silent. But Yarro, Yarro, truly, do you think she does not know already my intent?"

"She is waiting, Mother. She is thinking perhaps I can dissuade you. Oh, please," the young man wailed, crumpling his body into the sand and wrapping it around the axe. "Please, go to worship her, not destroy her."

The woman looked at her son. Her body quivered with rage, one arm trembling back as if to strike. But suddenly she dropped her arm, she drooped. Her body shook, but not with anger, not with tears. With laughter. Howling, shrieking laughter that reached to the mountains and crashed there like waves. Then her laughter stopped. The air froze around them, still and silent and deadly, and into the silence the woman spat her words.

"Am I not keeper of the stories?" she hissed. "Do I not know who she is, and how, and why? The prophecy speaks of this time. It shows us the blessing upon our people when I set the Goddess free. Would you argue with this?"

"A blessing on our people, perhaps, but a curse on you."

The woman shrugged. "It is part of the cycle, Yarro. The prophecy calls for a death. That is all right."

"Mother..."

"No, Yarro. I am old. Let me be."

Yarro hesitated. He looked over his shoulder at Maruta, his eyes as sharp as pain. Then he rolled off the axe and lay flat, his face turned toward the sky that was large and white with clouds. The woman snatched up the axe and strode down the hill to the foot of Maruta's statue.

Yes, yes, Maruta cried inside her soul. Strike me.

But even as the woman planted her feet before her, even as she firmed her grip, Yarro hurtled down the hill. Yelling, he threw himself across Maruta's body.

"No, Mother, no! I cannot let you destroy yourself."

"It's a statue I've come to destroy, child. Now stand aside."

But Yarro would not move. Maruta could feel his trembling, could smell the cloying stench of his fear, but he did not move.

"Kill him," Maruta cried out. "Knock him down."

But the woman didn't even try.

Incensed, Maruta called the lightning down yet again. But this time, instead of killing the mortal, the blast turned him into glass. Glittering shards of crystal he was, vibrant with the color of sky and sea and the wind chimed across his back. The woman gasped and Maruta could understand why, for she, too, was awed and shocked by the beauty of the man.

Then the woman wailed.

"Yarro!" she cried, and flung the axe aside. "Yarro!" The woman threw herself against the brittle legs of her son and clung.

"Forget him," Maruta said. "He is gone. Do what you have come for."

But the woman paid no attention. She wailed, cried, tore her clothes. She rolled on the sand and pummeled the young man's stiff body until her hands bled, and it struck Maruta for the first time that mortals missed their dead. That is what it meant to be alive.

Something in Maruta shifted and she felt the woman's pain. If she could have moved, she would have bowed and begged forgiveness. But she could not, for even still the woman raged and mourned and would not break her, and at last Maruta could stand no more and she screamed.

"Enough," she said. "When will you release me?"

And the woman raised her face and answered, as if she had heard Maruta's cry.

"Never," she said. "Stay there forever. I care not for you now." Then she scrabbled over to where the axe lay, half hidden in the sand, and Maruta had the wild thought that now, now the woman would strike her, that her words were but taunts. Yet when the woman brought her axe down, it was not on Maruta's head. It was on her Yarro's.

Maruta watched the young man's soul drift from the shattered glass. She watched it lean over, kiss the woman who had been its mother, and sail off. Wretched, Maruta stared.

The woman didn't even glance at the Goddess before turning and trudging back up the hill toward her home.

Maruta stared, trying to comprehend, to understand what had happened. She would have killed the woman, that instant, but for the chance, however slight, that the woman would return to smash her, too.

Still the woman climbed on.

"Come back," Maruta cried. "Come

back and free me." And an eddy of sand swirled around the woman's feet.

It seemed the woman stopped, considered. Maruta was sure her head flicked back, ever so slightly, that her eyes grazed the skies if only for a moment.

"Yes," Maruta said. "Yes, come back."

But the woman didn't, and Maruta became afraid.

"You must come back," she shouted. "You must. Do you hear me? Or have you forgotten what I can do?" And Maruta filled the sky with thunder and swept sand into the woman's eyes.

The woman stopped. Slowly, she turned. She rested the axe head on the sand and shook her head.

"Ah, yes, Goddess. Your powers. So I must complete my task, after all. But let me tell you, and this I mean with all my heart, if I had only myself to consider, I would see you trapped in stone forever. But for my people, I must see you free."

Then she raised the axe above her head and started running. "Ayyah!" she shouted and hurled the axe into the statue's cheek.

Maruta felt her head snap from her neck, felt it fly, felt her face shatter. For an instant, the pain gripped her, clung to her with teeth and limb, and her soul wailed. But the light poured through in fistfuls, warming her, until her agony was gone. Collecting herself, Maruta streamed through the hole in her neck and soared toward home, forgetting the woman even as she flew.

It was wonderful. The air felt crisp and sharp, the colors shimmered and thundered so bright were they. Her ears were clear again, so clear that she could hear the tunnelling of a rabbit beyond the mountain. She felt new again. Alive. She dipped and turned, relishing the feel of wind against the lights and colors of her true form. She'd known a mortal woman's shape, felt her pain. Now she also knew a mortal's delight. When before had she felt her world so keenly?

Elated, laughing, Maruta flew through the clouds, danced across the atmosphere, sailed up, up until she reached her home. She rolled onto the soft grass. Tears splashed her cheeks. What shimmering skies, like a room full of crystals.

Her sisters poured over her, kissing her and chattering. They smelled of clove and hibiscus and told her everything, absolutely everything that had passed in the eons since she'd been gone. Maruta leaned back against them, breathed in the cypress pollen, and let the lilt of their laughter soothe her, lull her, until she began to forget. Had she ever really lived among mortals at all?

But there was a pomegranate tree that grew in the garden. The pomegranates were sharp ripe the day a sister plucked the fruit. She brought it to the others, who lay sprawled in the meadow grass, and dribbled a bit of juice onto Maruta's tongue.

"Sweet, isn't it?" the sister said, giggling.

But Maruta could not answer, for suddenly she remembered all she'd lost, and the memory was sharp and sweet as pomegranate juice. She cried out, appalled.

"What is it? Maruta, sit back." They tugged at her arms, pulled at her hair, but Maruta would not lie down again. Gently she separated herself from her sisters. Though they cried to her, she wandered away, taking one last look around the garden she'd dreamed of for centuries. Then she walked to the end of the grassy knoll that marked the edge of her world and jumped.

She fell, arms at her sides, hurtling down, faster and faster, dropping through the clouds so fast she ignited. Her body flared in the sky as she fell even faster, the air melting around her And so she dropped to earth; plummeted into the ground until her body was buried even above her head.

She was a Goddess, of course, and could not die. There she hung, encased in glass in the earth. Oh, she could tremble the ground, perhaps fling her crystal body from it like lava. But even now, she could feel the hum of the world as it rumbled across space, feel the gentle rocking as the planet turned, and she laughed aloud.

Her laughter sounded within her crystal tomb like music.

❧

**Barbara Stevens Graybeal** lives in Austin, Texas. This is her first sale to *FANTASY Magazine*, and since her cover letter was extremely brief (these are my favorites, actually, since lengthy cover letters from newcomers, complete with gushing compliments, narrative biographies, and a complete description of the story plot, often serve only to convince me that you aren't a professional writer yet), we don't know much about her. *(Can you tell I'm vamping to fill up space? [grin] — REH)*

**Margaret Organ-Kean** is an artist living in Seattle. She studied art and art history at Boston University and University of Washington, and currently does computer support for a living.

Artwork by Margaret Organ Kean

# Death Test

by B.V. Larson

The mists hung low and heavy over the black waters of the bay. Beyond the gray shroud that enveloped me and my boat a wan pink light glowed — a hint of the coming dawn. By noon this day I would either be an adult woman and a true sorceress, or a dead girl. I drew my cloak tighter around my neck and hooked the clasp, feeling glad that my adopted colors were the gray of storm clouds and the blue of ocean depths. Neither shade was highly visible.

My paddle slid in and out of the black seawater in slow strokes. I did my best to paddle silently. Katyn, you must never take two steps where one will do, my mistress Mirlyn had told me over a breakfast of steaming coffee and crabs on the beach in the pre-dawn twilight. An apprentice who makes a quick crossing will often die quickly as well. If there was anyone I must succeed for, it was old Mirlyn, the sorceress of my village. Even my mother's pride was secondary to pleasing Mirlyn.

Twice I saw the black water swirl and sink in an unnatural way. I held both my breath and my paddles until the things below made up their minds concerning my fate. Both times good fortune allowed me to pass. Without incident, I reached the rocky jetty that stuck out like a protruding tongue from the islet's side .

Mooring my craft carefully, I climbed onto the jetty. From this low vantage point, only the top half of the tower I must master was visible. Tooth-like barbicans and flying spires decorated the summit of smooth dark stone. The tower was so tall and tapered that it looked as thin as a wand, although I knew it to be built of the heaviest enchanted stone.

Near at hand, at the landward end of the jetty, yawned the mouth of a cave. Like the hundreds of other would-be sorceresses that had challenged the tower over the centuries before me, I decided to enter the cave. The tower was the final test for every sorceress to pass, but most failed. If I could reach the top by noon, then I would be a true sorceress. Grabbing up a handful of willows, I fashioned a makeshift torch and whispered a small enchantment. The green sticks smoldered for moment, then flared into life. The sight of the fire cheered me.

Inside the cave a stairway started abruptly. With brisk steps, I mounted the stairs that cut into the basalt interior of the islet, always aware that noon was not far from coming. At noon each day the guardian of the tower awakens, Mirlyn had told me over the cheerful blaze of our beach fire. The sorceress that once ruled the tower was a powerful animator of stone and metal. The guardian is a suit of enchanted plate mail that moves freely within the tower. Anyone inside will die most horribly. No one can best this evil spirit, only avoid it. It sleeps from dawn till noon each day, and stalks trespassers through the afternoon and night.

The stairs wound into the solid rock, each step worn down in the middle by the tread of countless boots. After a seemingly endless climb, I reached the plateau that topped the islet. Stepping out into the dim light of early morning I blinked and shivered. A sharp wind sang over the rocks and around the tower, lifting my cloak and numbing my face with its chill breath. Since the top of the islet was above the fog bank, the view was breathtaking. A dense billowing blanket of fog hid the water from view all the way out to the sea in the east. On the horizon were islands of land, hills and mountains. The bluish-white peaks of the dragon-spine mountains were clearly visible in the distance, marching along the coast toward the northern wastes.

The tower was perched on the rounded hump of rock I stood on, along with a lonely looking well and the nests of several hundred disgruntled seabirds. After tossing the smoking remains of my torch from the cliff face, I wandered around the edge of the plateau, somewhat at a loss.

Up close, the tower was if anything more impressive than when seen at a distance. It seemed impregnable to an army of thousands, much less to a rather skinny girl of sixteen summers. The lowest arrow slit was at least fifty feet from the ground. After wasting some fifteen precious minutes pondering the problem I decided that it was time to consult the oracle I had been provided, for the first of the three times it could be used. I placed the tiny gold figurine of the gynosphinx on the ledge of flat stone surrounding the well and lightly tapped its forehead once. The magic tickled my fingertips as it was released. The gold

Artwork by Gail Butler

figurine grew and grew, its shape flowing like candle wax on a smith's anvil until it stood more than a foot tall and bore tawny fur and sharp white teeth. "What is it that you ask of me, child?" she rumbled in a deep bass voice that spoke of impossible size.

"How may I enter this tower?" I asked, gesturing to the fortress that overshadowed us.

The gynosphinx took a moment to preen her beautiful fur and furled wings before answering. "Isn't it best to approach the most difficult problems from the other side?" she asked, her tiny green eyes meeting mine for a moment before she collapsed in a puff of golden mist into a figurine again.

I frowned immediately, chiding myself for having expected more. She had answered in the fashion of such beings, replying to a question with a question that was in itself a riddle. I replaced the golden figure in my pocket and tapped my lips in thought. A sharp buffet of wind ripped at my cloak like a thief's fingers and brought the salty tang of the sea to my nostrils.

How could I approach the tower from the other side? Taking care not to step on the nesting seabirds, I circled the tower again, seeing no difference between the northern and southern exposures. Featureless rock shot up into the heavens with equal imperviousness when viewed from all angles. I felt along the opposite side of the tower from the cave mouth, searching hopelessly for a secret entrance. Indeed, the oracle's riddle was frustrating. How could a featureless, circular tower truly be approached from the other side? Towers were essentially cylindrical things.

"Ah," I sighed aloud, nodding to myself. I produced the gynosphinx from my pocket and gave her a reproachful look. She seemed to gleam back at me in the growing light of day. "Perhaps instead of 'from behind', you meant 'from beneath'?"

I walked away from the tower to the cliff face, where I skirted around the edge looking for a way down. Finding nothing promising, I returned to the cave mouth and examined the stairway. Had the whole thing been a trick? Was I supposed to find another entrance all the way back at the jetty? Had I wasted all this time and one question from my oracle as well?

I was about to run down the steps and back to the jetty when I thought of the well and ran to it. Down at the bottom the well was dry. I made out the dim shape of a large bucket, and a rusty pile of chain beside it. I needed something to climb down there and investigate the well for me. Working fast, sweat popping on my brow to be quickly dried by the ceaseless winds, I cast a calling enchantment.

Even as I completed the ritual, I realized that I was making a mistake, that in my haste I had panicked and tried to use my magic too quickly, without thinking. A cold hand of fear gripped my stomach, I could feel the enchantment unraveling, it was flawed and it took me a moment to figure out how. When I realized my mistake, I bit my own lip in frustration. There were no small creeping creatures to call here on this forgotten rock, therefore my calling could not succeed. More humiliating was the fact that it was obvious that such creatures were absent. Any ferrets or rats would have long ago reduced the population of seabirds that nested everywhere.

A hiss escaped my teeth as the enchantment tore apart completely with an audible sound like the ripping of linen. There was a random flash of colored light that panicked the seabirds around me and sent the whole flock aloft crying their distress. I raised my arms to defend my eyes and when I lowered them, I saw a splay-footed little creature with a toadlike body and a human face. He grinned at me with pink raw-looking lips. I noticed a powerful odor of rotting fish and wrinkled my nose involuntarily in disgust.

"What can I do for you, mistress?" the thing asked.

"What are you?" I gasped. My enchantment had clearly fumbled worse than I had imagined possible. Instead of calling a helpful natural creature I had summoned a tiny monster.

"Snubwort is my most casual name. I'm a friend, let me assure you," the thing said, croaking his words.

"You're an imp of some kind," I said, narrowing my eyes as I examined the creature. "Probably a sea imp, by the look and smell of it."

Snubwort rose on his splayed feet and did a grotesque little courtesy. The imp grinned again with his toothless pink mouth. "What may I do for you?"

"Why don't you just vanish and go back where you came from?"

The creature made a bizarre choking sound, which I took to mean he was amused. He shook his neckless little head. "No, you summoned me and I can't go until I have properly performed a task for you."

"Must you do something for me? You won't just leave?"

"I will follow you to the end of your days if need be, to complete my duty."

As Snubwort spoke a devious sparkle in his eyes caught the sunlight. I shuddered slightly at the thought of spending the rest of my days with the disgusting creature riding my shoulders, or perhaps clinging to me beneath my cloak. Impulsively, I reached out and tried to push him into the well. With another choking laugh, he hopped nimbly away.

Artwork by Gail Butler

"Such gratitude you show your servants," he complained.

I closed my eyes for a moment and considered what advice old Mirlyn would give me at this moment. Beware the dark ones, she had always said. It is their way to give only the reverse of what you desire.

"What I command," I said slowly, choosing my words with care, "is to seal off this well forever. I fear that there is an opening down at the bottom that may allow evil things to escape the earth."

The sea imp lifted a finger that was as thin as a stalk of wheat and grinned widely. "I have my task! I will be but a moment!" he said and dived into the open mouth of the well.

From far below came the echoing sounds of great activity. I looked over the edge, but could see little. I heard scraping and digging and the dry rattle of a chain. Several minutes passed and then Snubwort reappeared, clambering up over the edge of the well dragging a length of chain over his shoulder. Grunting and trembling with effort, he reattached the chain to the winch, so that it could again be used.

"Done! Your fears were ungrounded, mistress; there was no tunnel into the underworld. So I took it upon myself to fix the bucket and repair the chain," said Snubwort.

"I suppose you have done well," I said, making sure I sounded dubious. "Your task is completed."

With a last choking laugh, Snubwort trotted to the edge of the cliffs and dove off into the sea.

When he had gone I smiled to myself. The perverse little imp had done even more than I could have gotten a rat or ferret to do, had I succeeded in calling one. My back straightened with a much needed boost of confidence — then I glanced over my shoulder at the sun that rose so quickly to its zenith and my confidence evaporated. I was still only a girl apprentice who had nearly lost everything due to a stupid mistake. Womanhood was yet to be gained.

Clambering down the rusty chain I wondered if I would ever have the strength of limb to pull myself back out. The world of light receded to a small blue-white circle overhead. The winds shrieked over the mouth of the well, while inside the rattling and clinking of the chain echoed in my ears. I let go and dropped the last few feet to the muddy bottom. For a few panicky moments I saw no exit, and feared the worst. Had I

gambled too much on the perversity of the imp? Had he, probably for the first time in his unknowable existence told the truth? Breathing hard, I stared up the long swaying length of chain to the distant world of light and air far above. I half-expected to see Snubwort show himself at the top, laughing in his odd way and cavorting around in mockery.

Snubwort didn't appear and eventually I found the shadowy opening in the stones. Small and half-filled with mud, it led to an even blacker tunnel. I realized that it must head in the general direction of the tower and looked for something I could coerce into providing light for me. I pulled a loose stone from the wall and used a simple enchantment to enhance the natural glow of the moss that coated the stone. Soon a soft green glow filled the bottom of the well.

At the end of the tunnel I reached a prison cell. It was clear that the tunnel had once been an escape route for the cell's inhabitant. Fortunately, the cell door was unlocked and I slipped out into the hallway beyond. Bones and dusty cobwebs filled the way up to the warden's office. I tried the heavy door, but found it locked. Through the steel grate in the door I could see a rotting table of ancient hardwood and beyond a stairway that doubtless led up to the base of the tower. On the warden's desk was a dusty pile of rolled up documents. For several minutes I searched the hall and the other cells in the dungeon, to no avail. There was no other exit. I returned to the great door and beat on it, working the iron ring, hoping that perhaps it was only stuck.

Finally, I pulled out the golden oracle again, despairing in the knowledge that I was about to use up my second question before I had even managed to enter the tower proper. I set the figurine on the flagstones and tapped it impatiently. The transformation took only a few seconds, but it seemed like an eternity to me.

The gynosphinx looked around the dungeon with curiosity, then shook her head. "Tsk, girl-child. You have done well, but you use your powers unsparingly."

"Tell me how I may enter the tower above."

Graceful and catlike, the gynosphinx stepped to the door and then jumped with a sudden flurry of birdlike wings up to the steel grate. Her exquisite head swiveled and she transfixed me with piercing gaze. "Where does a lazy man keep his keys?"

A moment later she collapsed again and I thoughtfully picked up the figurine from between the bars of the grate. I glanced down at the lock, holding my brightly glowing stone in cupped hands. The key was definitely missing. This gave me an idea, however. I placed the stone in the steel grate so that it shined its light into the warden's office. Stooping down, I looked through the keyhole. Or rather I didn't. The hole was blocked.

"Again, the riddle is made clear," I said aloud to the dusty cobwebs. The jailer had indeed been lazy. He had left his keys in the lock on the other side, many years ago. The only problem was moving them onto my side of the door.

Whispering and working with my hands, I grabbed up and shaped a puff of the old stale air in the dungeon. The air was hard to work an enchantment on, being lifeless for so long, but I managed it. Forming a funnel with my fingers, I directed a powerful jet through the steel grate. The papers on the desk took flight along with centuries of dust, turning the office into a swirling maelstrom of debris. With more delicate, controlled puffs I managed to send the papers flying toward the door. One of them slid underneath and I mentally thanked my mistress for having forced me to spend hours flying feathers and leaves around the library back home.

Once the parchment was underneath the lock I poked the key through the keyhole, so that it clinked onto the parchment, then pulled it under the door. In moments I was through the warden's office and hurrying up the steps.

For some reason I had expected daylight when I reached the ground floor of the tower, but of course as there were no windows, there was none. Instead I passed a kitchen level, two storerooms, and finally reached the armory before the first arrow slits let through a glimmer of light from the outside. I rushed to the first of them eagerly and apprehensively. I mentally judged the sun to be two thirds of the way up to its zenith. A cold lump formed in my throat as I realized I had less than two hours left to complete my task.

I charged up the steps two at a time, unable to contain my eagerness to climb. Each step lightened my heart as I knew I was closer to my goal. The second level of the armory was filled with crossbows and glaives, their steel still bright and sharp. The armory was followed by several levels of barracks for the absent garrison, then more levels of luxurious apartments for favored guests. The next floor up was a small meeting room with colored light streaming in a tall narrow window of stained glass. The following level was blocked with debris and had partially collapsed. I almost pushed through between the fallen beams when I noted a tripwire gleaming at knee-level in front of me.

I stood there for at least a quarter of an hour, trying to discern what trap could be ahead and how I could pass unharmed. I am no trained cat burglar. With a hiss of frustration I pulled forth the gynosphinx for the third and last allowed invocation.

"How may I avoid the next barrier that I'll encounter?" I asked, purposefully keeping the question vague.

"Is not living stone more dangerous than dead stone?" asked the gynosphinx, winking at me before she vanished. I didn't share her amusement.

"What does that mean?" I asked in frustration. The lump of shaped gold in my hand made no move to answer. After chewing my lip for several minutes I could still make no sense of the oracle's words and decided to proceed. Let death take me in bravery rather than in cowardice.

Climbing through the ruined room I discovered that the entrance to the next level was hopelessly blocked by a huge chunk of broken wall. Despairing, I thrust my head through one of the windows to see how I might climb.

The view was breathtaking. I spent at least a minute just gazing at the world from this great height, several hundred feet above the dark waters. The fog had lifted, leaving only the lightest haze of feathery white to haunt the churning sea. The waves below were no longer distinct, but instead only broad lines of foam converging slowly on the islet. A hundred seabirds wheeled and screamed around the tower, most of them below my vantage point.

Directly above, a startling figure was rooted to the tower wall. The upper body of a gargoyle of surpassing ugliness leered down at my upturned face. Bird droppings ran white down the dark stone.

The gargoyle gave me a start, but represented an opportunity. Returning laboriously to the armory, I retrieved a long-handled glaive with a hook in its blade and returned to the window. Hooking the monstrous statue through the window, I took a deep breath and slid out into open space. The cold winds buffeted me against the tower bricks and tossed my cloak over my head. I climbed up the leather-wrapped pole and managed to hug the gargoyle.

Artwork by Gail Butler

I thought I felt something then — a tingle of magic perhaps — or maybe the slightest movement felt by my fear-heightened senses. Suddenly, I realized what the gynosphinx had warned me about. In the space of a second I lost my fear of the great height I was at and was taken by cold terror of the stone I was hugging to. Knowing, due to the fine education my mistress had provided me, that a creature of this sort took time to animate itself, I scrambled upward with frantic energy.

Moments later I stood upon the monster's corroded back and felt the grinding of stone as it shifted beneath my feet. I looked down and saw it twist its torso to face me, claws reaching. I threw myself through the tower window on the next level and lay there in a shuddering heap. Outside a grating roar sounded, and a terrible scraping sound of stone against stone began.

"A powerful ward against thieves," I gasped. "Of course." I drew the gynosphinx from my pocket and it seemed to gleam at me in amusement. The level of the tower I had attained was next to the last. This had clearly been the sumptuous apartments of the lord of the tower. Divans upholstered in rich rotten silk sat amidst a profusion of cushions and tapestries. In the center was a ring of five bronze braziers, a necessity in any building of cold stone. In the midst of the braziers stood what had to be the guardian of the tower. A massive suit of plate mail stood there without support. At least seven feet in height, it carried a huge war hammer with a shiny spike on one end. A dusty blue plume sprouted from its heavy steel helm.

The sight of the guardian gave new energy to my efforts. Frantically I searched the room, but to no avail. Although I had nearly three-quarters of an hour left I could find no way to reach the top of the tower. There were no steps, no ladders, no trapdoors. Apparently, the tower had been built with some magical or cunningly hidden method of reaching the top. It was simply beyond my means. There was no way to go down either, as the gargoyle showed no signs of turning back into silent stone.

Weary and aching, I slumped against the hard curving wall and rested. Had it all come to this? An impossible barrier right at the very end of such a hard journey? It seemed extremely unfair, and I came close to weeping. The sun outside crept very close to its zenith when I pulled out the gynosphinx again and fingered it gingerly. To summon aid a fourth time might possibly save my life by allowing me to reach the top of the tower, but I would then never be accepted as a sorceress.

"No," I told the gynosphinx. "A woman can rely only on herself."

I came to a sudden, hard decision. Walking to the window again with my cloak thrown back from my shoulders, I put away the figurine and raised my hands high in the posture of powerful magic. I would attempt to change my shape to that of a hawk and fly to the top of the tower. I didn't have the skill for such a fantastic enchantment, but I had witnessed some of the oldest adepts doing such things during the great fairs of the earth-mother.

Before I had uttered the first words of the dangerous enchantment, the ceiling above me gave way in an odd liquid fashion. With regal grace, the high sorceress of the ruling council herself floated down to the floor from above. She was a startlingly tall woman with a handsome face and jade-green eyes.

"Mistress!" I cried and dropped to my knees.

"Rise, Sorceress Katyn. You need no longer kneel before anyone," said the high lady.

I looked at her askance.

"You chose self-reliance and thereby passed the final test."

Before I could reply, we heard the guardian raise its war hammer behind us. Stepping together to the window, the great lady took my hand and together we leapt out into space, falling with the weight of two feathers toward the distant ground. As we floated by, the gargoyle gnashed its stone teeth in frustration.

❧

**B.V. Larson** is the V. P. of Development at a software engineering company that specializes in factory automation. At night he studies for his Ph.D. in Computer Science and writes fiction. A native Californian, he likes to swim, hike, travel overseas, build mudcastles with his son, and write more fiction. He's sold eight short stories and is circulating manuscripts for two novels.

**Gail Butler** has two favorite media of expression: her artwork and the telephone. She's sometimes called "the Jewish mother of Northwest fandom", and her supportive phone calls are legendary, but the day you see a letter from her, well, watch the sky for pink barnyard animals with curly tails — and wings!

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Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

# A Spell For Annalise

## by Parke Godwin

On an obscure island surrounded by an unimportant body of water, there lived a young girl named Annalise who lay under a spell, the dismal nature of which had never been clarified for her, though it seemed to render Annalise strikingly unattractive. At least her mother never said she was anything else and her father was too busy to notice her much.

Annalise searched her mirror for an answer, finding only imperfections. She was told the pimples would depart in the fullness of time, but that didn't help now. Her nose seemed to grow larger with each worried inspection. True, she was a loser, but she would not surrender without a fight.

"I'll make myself brilliant," Annalise conceived. "My searing intellect will dazzle merely beautiful people and they'll never know how I feel inside."

That worked all too well. They never guessed, went away, and left Annalise in her brilliance.

"My hands are worst of all," she schemed. "I'll play music, beautiful mu-

sic, so soulfully and swiftly, no one will notice my fingers are large and warty."

Right again. People admired her talent but left her alone with it.

"I won't care," Annalise whispered terminally to her pillow. "They'll never see my heart."

And so they didn't.

One summer day when she was sixteen, walking by the sea and feeling as lonely as sixteen could feel, which is considerable, she came upon an odd-looking stranger carving letters into a driftwood log. He wasn't much for company but Annalise didn't feel she could be picky.

"What are you carving?" she asked.

"What I am." He blew the wood crumbs from the last letter. "There, finished."

GOBLIN.

So far as Annalise knew, he might be one. Homely enough, his bushy gray hair wind-blown and salt-stiffened, skin leather brown, dressed as if he'd hurried through a closeout in a thrift shop. But hardly malicious as one thought of goblins; more like a leprechaun at the frayed end of his whimsy and quite ready to throw in the towel. Annalise was understandably skeptical.

"A real goblin?"

"Real as we get," he acknowledged with better grace than most of his unpredictable kind. "And at your service. Make a wish."

"Wish?" Annalise stared at him. "You can do magic?"

"When needed." The Goblin looked her through and through. "The usual: mud into gold, that sort of thing."

"Father would like that." Annalise's father had a good deal of money which seemed to require his constant attention. His liver had enlarged from worry over losing it.

"Words into music," the Goblin went on invitingly, "darkness into light."

Annalise hardly dared say it. "Ugliness?"

"Into beauty," he finished, smiling. "I thought you'd never ask."

Annalise discovered a new problem with her hands; they wanted to cover her face. She denied them. "I don't believe you. You're an old fake!"

The Goblin appeared unfazed. "And how real are you, girl?"

That was a crusher considering all she'd done to cover and revise herself. "I can't help it. I'm bewitched."

"Besieged," he agreed. "Anyone can see that. There's a high, thick wall about you. Alas, demolition's not my specialty. When you get tired of living inside, let me know."

"Don't hold your breath," Annalise prophesied from dreary experience. "Boys run from me, dogs shiver in their sleep when I pass, and an over-the-hill goblin isn't going to help. Try woodcarving. Good-bye." And she went.

Still, lying in bed late in the summer night, Annalise thought sometimes she could hear the Goblin's voice speaking or singing, since one was the other coming from him: *mud into gold, words into music...*

"Magic," Annalise grumped into her pillow. "Nothing but a *very* weird old man."

*Ugliness into beauty.*

Couldn't be. Never happen. But if it could...

One awful morning the sun rose glaring and horrid as the way Annalise felt, and her mirror outdid itself in frankness. She walked the streets of the town, surer than ever of the spell that clung to her like the suggestion of eggs past their prime. *Had* to be hopeless, then. She saw girls homely as herself laughing with handsome young boys. One was even in a wheelchair, which piled insult on injury. Annalise glowered at their happiness until the pain was a weight dragging on her heart and the corners of her mouth. In her chest a great dark bubble was swelling tight, and when it burst, she felt as if the bitterness would flood in a poisonous torrent through all of her for all time. Frightened, she ran away, out of the town to the safety of solitude and the beach. Then it happened.

"Someone must love me," she whispered. The words sounded strange. "Goblin? Goblin, where are you!" She turned about the beach, wild, desperate. The sand was deserted. A gull jeered at her. *Alone,* the surf breathed as it slid in over the sand. *Alone,* laughed the hovering gulls. Then Annalise felt a hand fall lightly on her shoulder. The Goblin grinned at her, impish and inviting as ever.

Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

"Don't be alone, Annalise."

Perhaps it was the sun's glare, but he seemed younger and much more presentable than she remembered. "Goblin, did you mean it? Can you make me beautiful?"

"You can."

"Me?"

"Of course you can."

Her hands strayed to her cheeks. "Will it hurt?"

Something like sadness clouded the indeterminate color of the Goblin's eyes. "Always does eventually. Nothing's free."

Frightening to have to change, even the notion of it. "Will you be with me?"

"Always," the Goblin promised.

Annalise took the hand he held out to her. She thought he smiled; she couldn't see his face clearly. In the sun's hard dazzle, it seemed to shift and change. Yes...he was much younger than Annalise thought at first. She steeled herself. "I'll do it. Hurry before I lose my nerve."

"Then close your eyes and tell me what you want most."

She knew but the painful truth stuck in her throat. "I can't."

"You have to try. That's the beginning."

Annalise found it easier to get out all in a rush. "Iwishsomeonelovedme."

With her eyes closed tight, the Goblin's voice was near and soft as her own wish. "Turn it around, Annalise."

That made no sense at all. "Me loved someone wish I. That's silly."

"Oh dear," the Goblin sighed, settling on the log with his name carved on it. "Far too rational. Absolutely sodden with intellect. Don't try to go it all at once. Relax. Find out how you feel."

That was harder than Annalise would have suspected. All her life she'd been mindful of what she should feel, not what she did or might. She faltered. "I feel..."

Once more the bubble swelled in her chest, but now the pain was softened a shade as the mellowed sunlight lit the sea and sand around her.

"When it comes," the Goblin read her thought, "listen to what it tells you."

*Lis-ten*, the surf whispered.

And the gulls hovering over them advised, *Lis-ten*.

Annalise listened, very still, still enough to know how she felt. "I must love someone," her self said. "Goblin, did you hear?" Like most determined intellectuals, simplicity astonished Annalise. "I *want* to love someone...but there's no one around."

Just her luck: things were going beautifully, the urge and the need overflowing in her heart like three pounds of molten pure gold in a two-pound mold — and no one to lavish it on. On his log, her casual magician chuckled.

"No one but us goblins."

The glare was quite gone, the sunlight slanting soft on the sand, driftwood shadows east of the afternoon just beginning. Annalise blinked. Her benefactor was still a goblin, still gray-brown, though in the warmer light he seemed — no, he *was* the handsomest of all possible things to go bump in the night or even at high noon. And the new, lighter sensation about her lips was a smile.

"I do love you, Goblin. It must be the magic."

"Wrong," he corrected gently. "You have until sunset to find the answer."

"But you said you'd be with me always."

"In a manner of speaking, like confidence and knowing yourself. But the wind's breezed it to the sandpipers: there's someone like you on the other side of the island with the other side of your problem. A girl who's always been beautiful, far as that goes, but not much else. Emergency case. And then, if I can squeeze it in" — the Goblin consulted an antique pocket watch that tinkled 'Time On My Hands' when opened — "there's a politician in whom I must seed a conscience like a migraine. Can't even stop for lunch."

The watch vanished into a frayed pocket; he held out brown fingers. "Take my hand, Annalise. There's all the time in the world or none. That's not magic, just life. You choose."

Later, when the sun had risen and gone down many hundreds of times, Annalise had only a dim picture of walking with the Goblin by the sea, through the sea grass, along the streets of the town. They told each other big, little, or secret things, and as time passed or seemed to stand still, Annalise forgot herself and saw only the Goblin. She felt a lightness and warmth about her whole being, young and wise and happy all at once, painful joy and delicious hurt like a sad song flourished from a clown's banjo. Men turned their heads, stopped and stared. Some who knew Annalise rubbed their eyes or polished their glasses and goggled again. Walking hand in hand with a goblin, unique in himself, was the most stunning young woman any of them had ever overlooked.

"Fantastic!" breathed one phrasemaker, salivating.

"Unbelievable," another gasped.

"Beautiful," said a third, simpler than the rest.

"Beautiful?" Annalise wondered. "Me?"

Their walk had brought them to the beach and the sea again. In her companion's hand something shimmered as it caught the setting sun. He held a small mirror before both of them. "Are you beautiful?"

"I don't know," Annalise cried out, older than when they started. "All I see is you."

"You must know," the Goblin urged, glancing at the sun. "Hurry."

"I don't believe it. I can't. The love was all your magic."

"No." He began to fade, grow older.

"Goblin, don't leave me!"

"Turn it around...."

The sun was gone. Annalise was alone by the log where he'd carved what he was into the wood and perhaps into her as well. She sat by the sea for a long time while the sky evening-dressed in indigo and hung itself with stars. The bubble swelled one last time in her breast, broke and ran its secret through her.

The magic was the love. Not Goblin's but her own.

Like all truths, a kind of sadness came with it, and loss, but the Goblin told her there would be that. Then and later and many times over when Annalise had to remind herself of the lesson again and again. And, since no wisdom comes free, she wondered what it might have once cost the Goblin himself — wondered while young, that is. When older, she didn't need to ask. For now, Annalise blew a kiss to the stars.

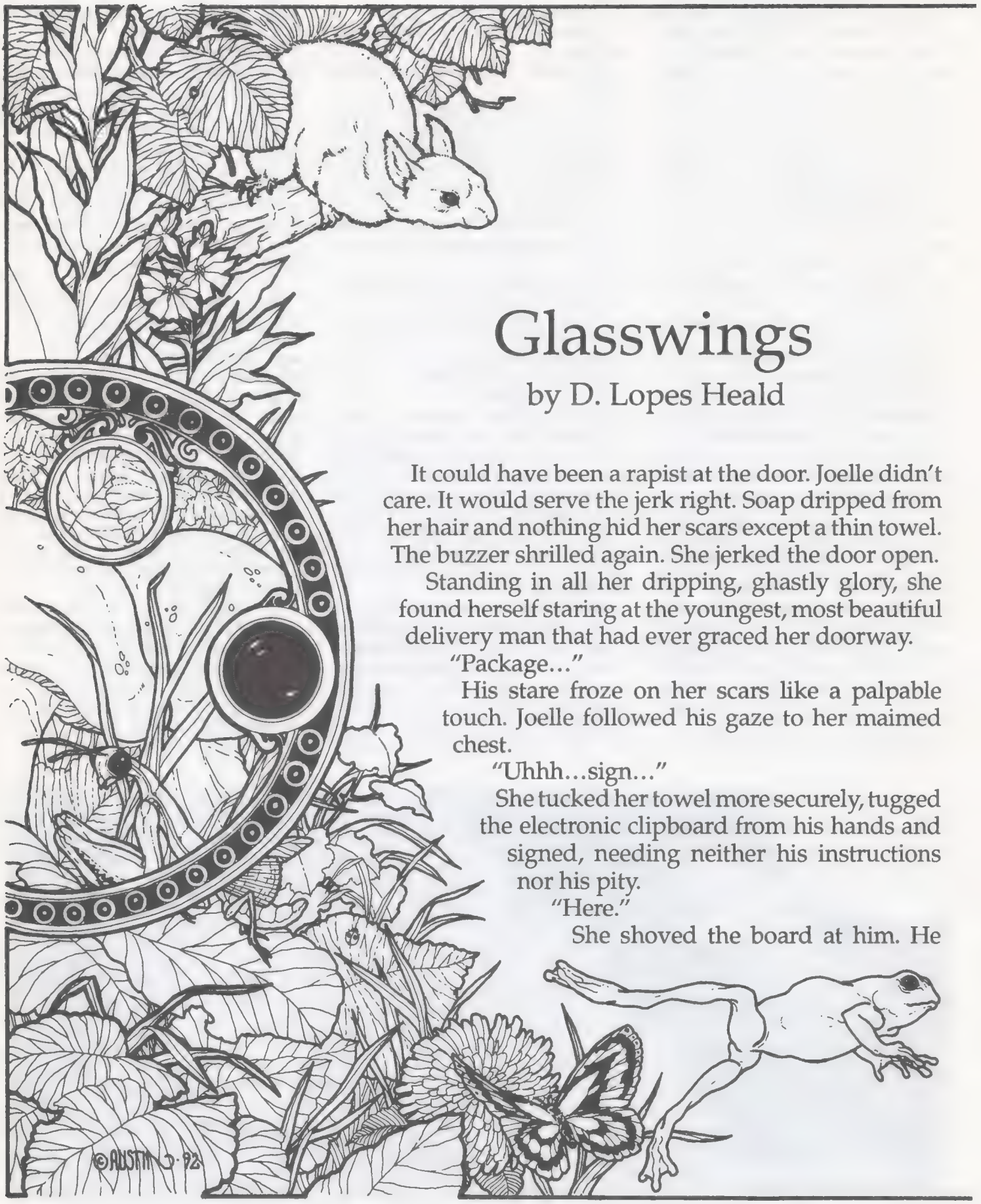
Sometimes when she was sad, she could feel the Goblin's hand on hers, and when she laughed there might be some echo of his. And since Annalise never forgot how or why or when to love, one assumes she laughed full and often.

The log still lies on the beach with GOBLIN cut deep into its grain and the name ANNALISE beneath, visited often by the sea and stars, happy people and those still hovering and hunting like the gulls.

PARKE GODWIN is the eclectic author of historical fantasy and modern novels including **FIRELORD**, **BELOVED EXILE**, and **A TRUCE WITH TIME**. He has co-authored books with Marvin Kaye and won a World Fantasy Award for his novella, "The Fire When It Comes". His most recently published novel is **SHERWOOD**, about Robin Hood; the tale's conclusion (originally titled **CONSCIENCE OF THE KING** but recently renamed **ROBIN AND THE KING**) will be released shortly. Avon Books recently purchased an sf novel of his called **LIMBO SEARCH**. He lives near Sacramento, California.

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK (whose last names are NOT hyphenated; I apologize for doing this wrong in earlier issues) and her husband, Steve Fahnestalk, were the 1991 recipients of the Canadian Aurora Award for artistic achievement in the field of speculative fiction. She lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk




# Glasswings

by D. Lopes Heald

It could have been a rapist at the door. Joelle didn't care. It would serve the jerk right. Soap dripped from her hair and nothing hid her scars except a thin towel. The buzzer shrilled again. She jerked the door open.

Standing in all her dripping, ghastly glory, she found herself staring at the youngest, most beautiful delivery man that had ever graced her doorway.

"Package..."

His stare froze on her scars like a palpable touch. Joelle followed his gaze to her maimed chest.

"Uhhh...sign..."

She tucked her towel more securely, tugged the electronic clipboard from his hands and signed, needing neither his instructions nor his pity.

"Here."

She shoved the board at him. He

recovered some composure.

"You want this inside, Ma'am? It's awfully heavy."

She wanted him gone. But the kids from the neighboring apartments were lurking at the man's back, stealing peeks of the freak and waiting for something to filch.

"Set it on the floor." She stood back so he could lean far enough inside to get the box clear of the door.

As he straightened, his arm brushed hers. His scent, a mixture of aftershave and truck exhaust, floated to her, startling to life old memories of times when she had been attractive enough, without being *good* looking, that a man like this would keep his distance for fear she'd latch on. But this one pitied her now, was trying so very hard not to show his revulsion.

"Thank you."

"Any time, Ma'am."

He left wearing the same guilty look of relief as Walter wore when he abandoned her.

She shut the door, locked it, and leaned against it, trembling. Had he looked up her towel to see how far the scarring reached, how much it affected? She knew he hadn't peeked, hadn't wanted to, knew she was foolish. But his kindness hurt. Everything hurt now.

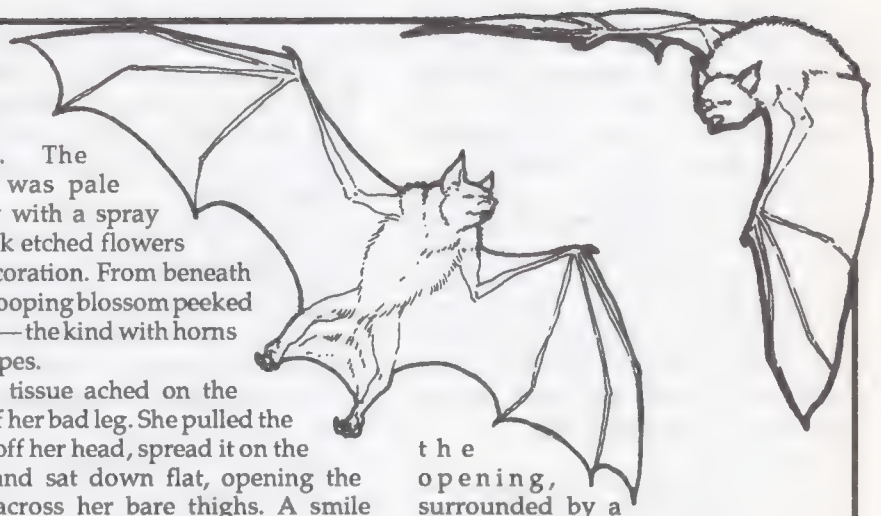
She glanced down, suddenly conscious of the box edge digging into her ankle. Stripping out of her towel, she wrapped it around her hair and squatted naked to examine her package. She received lots of packages, because she refused to leave the apartment for anything that could reasonably be delivered. But this wasn't anything she'd ordered, and the return address wasn't one she recognized — a store someplace in Europe.

She knew without opening it that it was from Walter — dear, suffering Walter, ex-husband, ex-lover, ex-rock, ex-life. Ex-Walter.

She opened the box anyway. He was maybe, out of all those *ex*es, not totally an ex-friend.

Splitting the strapping tape with a box opener she kept near the door, she watched packing beans foam outward. She'd become a connoisseur of packaging. The beans didn't make much mess if you kept them off the carpet.

Beneath the packing was a book — nothing exotic, neither leatherbound nor iron-clasped. It was just a big hardback, minus any paper jacket. The cover was pale yellow with a spray of black etched flowers for decoration. From beneath one drooping blossom peeked a faun — the kind with horns and pipes.



Scar tissue ached on the back of her bad leg. She pulled the towel off her head, spread it on the floor and sat down flat, opening the book across her bare thighs. A smile wrinkled her lips. Sometimes Walter still did good.

She squinted at the book one-eyed, cocking her head to get the best angle. Waterfalls and ferns, strawberries, toadstools, mossy rocks and willowy trees crowded the pages of the book. There were no words. None were needed. Trolls and ogres competed with fairies and dragons for playing room. She sat entranced — turning page after page — until the pain in her leg became unbearable, and she was forced to shift about.

In the process, she glanced into the box again, noticing that it wasn't empty. A thick bubble envelope filled the bottom. Engulfed by packing beans, the plastic looked like ice in snow.

The envelope was heavy and unsealed. She settled to the floor again, fumbling as her stiff, misshapen fingers lost their grip and a circle of glass slid onto her lap. For a moment, she thought it was an elaborate serving tray edged in gleaming silver. But the hairs on her leg showed through, grown suddenly huge. The swirls of surrounding scar tissue looked like ridged mountain peaks.

In spite of the view, it was the most beautiful and the biggest magnifying glass — the width of the book opened wide — that Joelle had ever seen. The silver edging was plain, but finely wrought. Small curves and dips in the metal formed grips at each oval end. The main glass sported insets of much smaller glass circles, like tiny moons, with more circles secured by silver work, surrounding its entire outer circumference.

When she looked closer, she saw there were tiny threads attached to the smallest moons. She pulled on a thread, and a little round window opened on invisible hinges. A tuft of leg hair showed through the opening, surrounded by a sea of magnified flesh.

She scrunched and shifted, trying to discover some comfortable position on the floor, too engrossed in the glass to get up and find a chair. As she turned the magnifier slowly round and round, she saw that the moons were of varying magnifications. Some even made things look smaller rather than larger.

Like the book, the glass was marvelous, and she realized why they'd come together. Opening the book wide again, she slid the glass over a large center plate that depicted a wild woodland scene.

A stag stood in a patch of emerald grass surrounded by towering trees and trailing vines. Tiny rodents rooted in the underbrush. Rust colored birds flew against a brilliant blue sky while smaller birds — yellow, scarlet, grey, violet — flitted through the treetops. Squirrels, flowers, foxes, skunks, badgers, moles, butterflies so tiny she could only see them with the help of the glass — all vied for her attention. A stream burbled through the greenery. Moss glistened on boulders. Lichen mosaics colored dry stone, and elves grinned from the hollow hearts of ancient trees.

Joelle smiled. Pushing the magnifying glass here and there, she discovered insects and fairies, squirrels and rats hiding in the greenery. One little moon had the trick of seeing in the dark. It revealed dwarfs, men, and strange creatures lurking in the forest shadows. Some of the figures seemed to be spying, while others held raised hunting bows or were locked in combat. Goblins grappled with each other or chased hapless elves. Men raised swords to ogres.

Artwork by Alicia Austin

The entire scene was a microcosm of life, both serene and violent at once — animals snarling, snapping, cowering while others grazed or preened — the whole of it an intricate maze, a puzzle, a mystery, and a work of wonder.

Joelle's eyes couldn't see fast enough for her mind, nor fully comprehend what they saw. She leaned nearer, hovering over the book, and in her excitement, her finger caught on the tiny window she'd opened. A prick of pain stabbed her fingertip. She looked down just as a drop of blood fell through the moon window and onto the illustrated page.

"Damn it."

She shoved the book — magnifier and all — to the floor and pulled the towel from her hair to wipe away the blood.

But she was too late.

The scarlet blot had spread, and while she crouched, towel in hand, it seemed to quiver, pulse, and rise from the glass, pulling a fuzz of darkness behind it.

She leaned away, scrabbling onto her knees, startled and doubting her vision. Then the darkness began to form, becoming round and hairy, snouted and fanged. And the biggest, ugliest rat she'd ever seen leapt off the page. Squealing, it banged into the wall while she struggled to her feet, clinging to her towel, so terrified she couldn't cry out.

Trapped in the corner between her front door and the coat closet, the monster hunched and snarled, exposing scimitar incisors. It stood knee-high to her and reminded her of a wolfhound more than a rat. Except it stank. And between her and it, another one formed.

That one lunged straight at her. She backed and hit it with her only weapon, snapping the towel across its snout with a loud crack. The rat whined and retreated.

But a third and a fourth sprang full-formed from the bloodied book. Her chest heaved. Warm liquid leaked onto her legs. She backed again, fighting nightmare images of flames and twisted metal as her fear gave new life to old horror.

The lead rat hissed and squealed. The other three answered it. She held the towel to her side, arm cocked, knowing she'd never have time to whirl-wrap and snap it now that the monsters were prepared. Distantly, she thought what a mess the packing beans would be to clean off the carpet. She must be insane.

Then a fifth rat popped up in the others' midst, and the entire pack made a run at her.

She threw the towel at them. Two of them slowed, tangled and distracted. Joelle screamed, long and loud. But the other rats kept coming, and in this complex no one bothered about a scream. Teeth sank into her ankle. She scooped a pepper mill off the kitchen counter and broke it over a hairy snout, screaming louder than ever.

The mill shattered without effect. A second set of fangs tore at her other ankle. She looked down to see a third rat attached to her calf, dug into such thick scar tissue that she couldn't feel its hold.

They were eating her alive!

Something flashed, long, thin, and silver.

A rat's head rolled, spurting blood. A blade skewered a hairy rump, then slashed the rat on her calf. Joelle struggled back, heart pummeling her lungs, eyes locked on the tiny, rescuing sword. Such a small blade, no longer than her largest kitchen knife, which she couldn't reach now — and wielding the sword was a man who stood no higher than mid-thigh to her.

The sight of him froze her, quite beyond the shock of giant rats. He was beautiful: tiny, but perfectly formed, heavily muscled, his expression grim, face young and tanned, the delivery man strangely shrunken. But it wasn't. This man's face was hard and lean, his expression unflinching as he faced a monstrous maimed rat with others circling and snapping, wanting to kill.

The largest rat lunged. He fended it off with a slash to its snout, backing and dancing, drawing the creatures away from her.

*She was free.*

She spun into the kitchen and grabbed a butcher knife from its block. But as she turned back to the fight, a wolf the size of a poodle sprang from her gift book. A beetle exploded after it, as big as a full grown sow. Across the dining nook, the little man was fighting for his life.

Joelle gripped the handle of her butcher knife. The wolf leapt for her throat. She slashed awkwardly and caught it across the stomach. Disemboweled, it fell.

But the giant black beetle scuttled toward her, its carapace shimmering. She threw the knife, not daring to get within reach of its clacking, scarlet mandibles. The blade bounced uselessly off chitin sides. She scrabbled sideways, fleeing the confines of the tiny cooking ell, circling, realizing her only escape was through the front door.

But she had to pass the book first, and a new horror was forming there, a dragon, of sorts, green-hided with pink and purple splotches, huge at the forefront but grotesquely pinched off in the middle, and shrunken behind. It writhed, spewing acrid smoke into the room, trapped in convulsive death throes. Its diamond-clawed feet scrabbled. One toe caught the magnifying glass, yanking it forward, and the whole misshapen mass toppled dead as the glass cut it off at the haunches.

Joelle screamed. An antenna brushed her thigh. She lurched away from it, scooped up the magnifying glass and bashed the beetle's scaly antennae, once and then twice, all the time scrabbling backward.

With the dragon's corpse blocking the outside door, she was forced toward the front room. Pincered mandibles opened and closed, opened, closed. She'd broken one antenna, but its stump still waved, scenting after her. Chitined feet clattered on the entryway's linoleum, then snagged and slowed in the living room carpet.

The rug saved her. The beetle hesitated. She staggered into a patch of sunlight in front of one window, flinging her arms wide for balance as her crippled legs wobbled. Fire burned up her palm. She screamed, and a beam of sunlight pierced the magnifying glass, streamed away from her and struck the beetle's armored head, bursting into a rainbow colored halo.

Joelle's heart stuttered. The beetle reared back, mandibles chattering, and it began to shrink. Struggling toward her, it grew smaller and smaller, until as it reached her, she smashed the pest dead with the silver edge of the glass.

Her heart stuttered. She gulped air, fighting to fill her lungs. Her vision blurred, then cleared, and she remembered she wasn't alone.

Wood splintered, and the little man leapt into sight atop her dining room table. Snatching up her heavy, leaded candle holders, he threw them one after the other. Glass shattered as one took out the dining room window. The other sent a rat sprawling, making it eight dead monsters on her floor. But two more rats and a couple of oversized shrews — birthed while she wasn't counting — were clawing the edge of the table.

A rat scrambled atop it. The diminutive warrior went down. Joelle screamed, lunged across the room, slammed the magnifying glass over the nearest shrew's back — and like the beetle, it began to shrink. It buried its teeth in her arm. She held on, and it lost its grip. She hit the second shrew with the glass, then bopped the nearest rat.

On the table, the little man beheaded his attacker. The remaining rat lunged for Joelle's throat. She whipped the glass up. The rat slammed against it. Sunlight streamed through the broken window and burst about its body. The monster screamed, sizzling as it shrank. She bludgeoned it with the glass. The little man jumped from the table, stomping and stabbing at shrunken shrews, leaping back to the table top to survey the scene for hidden enemies.

There were none. He froze in place. Nothing moved.

Stunned numb, Joelle looked down, looked about. She stood naked and bloody, surrounded by carnage and madness. None of it could be real. Blood seeped from clawed runnels on her arms. Green gore stained the floor around the misshapen dragon.

But this was her *apartment*, her ordinary, shabby home. None of this was possible.

Her eyes settled on the little man. His forest green huntsman's shirt was shredded, his chest bloody. He *couldn't* be real. But his sword clanked and his head struck the tabletop with a very real thump as he fainted.

She couldn't stop herself, couldn't deny the nightmare.

She grabbed for the man as his body threatened to slide off onto the floor. He was heavy, much heavier than any child that size — all muscle and bone. His face was bruised, and pale and stubbled with beard. She stretched him out flat, plucked a cushion off a chair to prop his head, and tiptoed through dead rats — her throat constricted, heart thumping — into the kitchen for a towel.

By the time she returned, his eyes were open.

"Anatah," he said, syllables slurring.

She leaned near him, mopping blood from his eyes. "Lie still. I'll call 911." *911?*

He caught her arm as she turned, and she stopped as much because he'd tethered her as because she couldn't imagine how to explain to any dispatcher the insanity surrounding her or that she needed help for a three-foot-high man.

"Anatah," he said again.

"Thank you," she said, guessing his meaning from his tone.

"Aia."

He rolled to his side, shaky and pale, his eyes studying her. She realized again that she was naked. Her leathery, nippleless breast hung next his face. If he was repulsed or shocked, he didn't show it. She thought he was still too stunned to really see her.

But she was wrong. As she tried to lean away, his hand rose. His fingers touched her shoulder ever so gently.

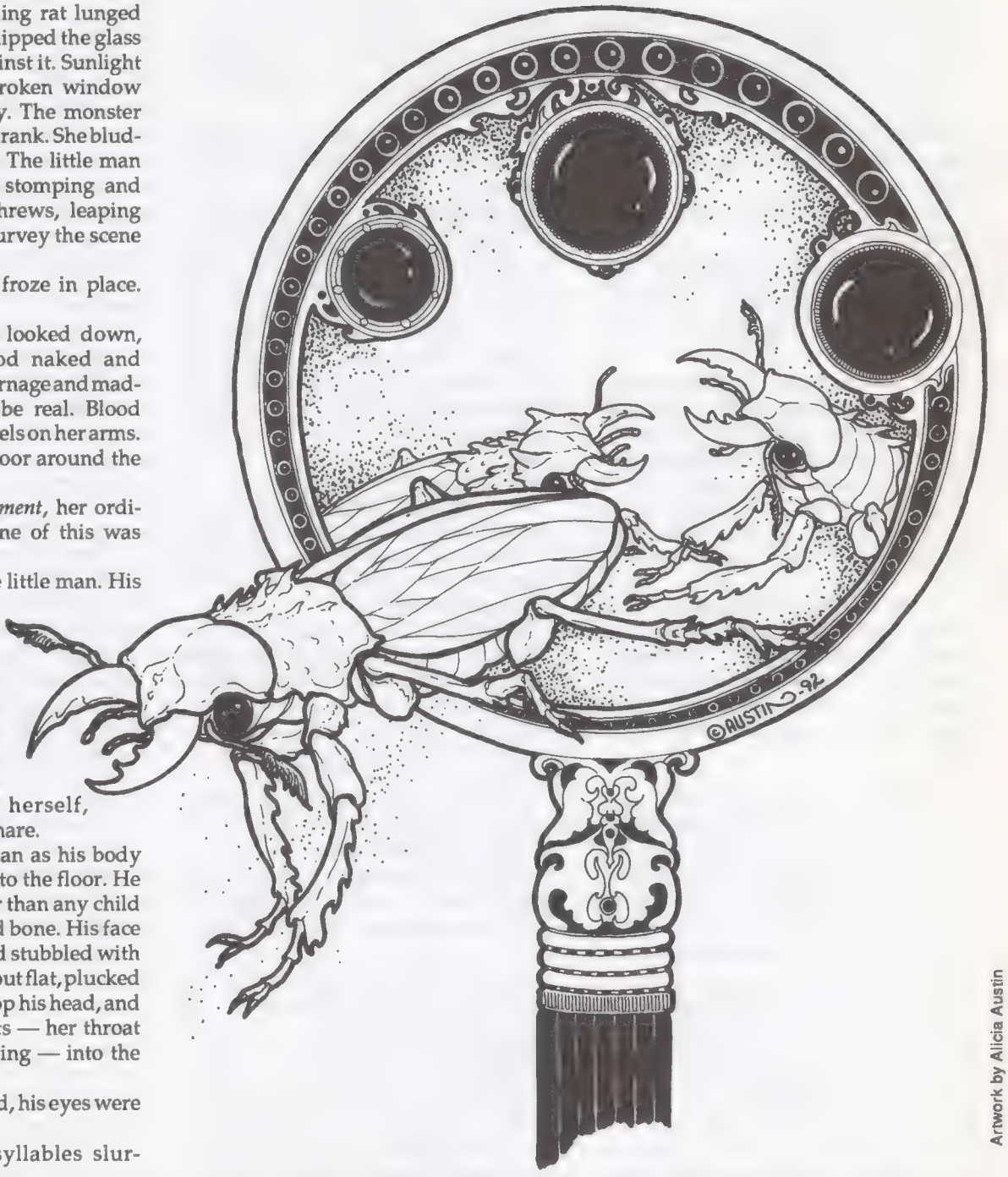
"Sho?" he asked.

"No." How she knew what he meant, she couldn't guess. But that wound didn't hurt anymore.

His eyes slipped away from her face, down her body. She clenched her teeth and bore with his examination. His gaze was matter-of-fact, yet gentler than the doctors' stares, analyzing, but not clinically. Then his eyes shifted, glancing down to the magnifying glass that lay now at his side. It was spattered with gore from the smashed beetle and bashed rats. He lifted it, stared at it a moment, then began to clean it with his ragged sleeve.

"What?" she asked. "What are you doing?"

But he just kept cleaning, until his arm




Artwork by Alicia Austin

shook so hard that the glass slipped from his grasp, thunking into the tabletop. Still he tried to wipe at it, until she pushed him gently back and cleaned it with the towel she'd brought for his wounds.

"There."

She held it up for him to see, and sunlight flashed through it. A beam struck his face.

She screamed, remembering the beetle and the rats.

But he didn't shrink. Quite the opposite, he grew. Muscled limbs expanded until they hung off the table and reached the floor. His torn clothing split and fell away.

And there they were — naked, staring at each other, he a big man in his true size — as the beetle, rats and shrews had returned to their true sizes. He was beautiful, as stunning now as he had been when miniaturized. She wanted to run, hide, cower. But his green-blue eyes looked at her gently — caring, not pitying.

"A'nao," he said, patting his leg.

Only then did she notice that though he was still bloodied, his hurts were gone, no trace of claw mark or puncture. Her breath caught. But she steadied. What was a little more madness amongst all this?

"Nao?"

He stood, dwarfing her. She looked up, letting him stare down at her twisted features. His hand brushed hers. His fingers rose to her face, then past her cheek to brush sparse strands of hair over her exposed pate. She fought tears. No one other than nurses or doctors had touched her since the accident.

He tugged the magnifying glass from her hand and set it carefully on the table. Then he bit his lip, hard and harder, until blood spurted from it, and while she stood too shocked to move, he kissed the top of her head, kissed every inch of it, working down to the orifice where her ear had been, then down farther, spreading blood with every kiss, stopping when he reached her shoulder to bite his lip again. And he went on, his kisses sensual yet not sexual.

He coated her arm, but couldn't nurse enough blood from his battered lip to do more than stain her hand. So he caught up his tiny sword from the floor, gripped it in both hands and slit his palms to scarlet.

With a shiver, he dropped the blade and began to stroke her body, down and down, over her chest, her stomach, downward while her heart vibrated, and her mind gave up any hope of sanity. He knelt. His hands slithered over her thighs, then her knees, ankles, to the very tip of her toeless foot, leaving all her fire-wracked body hidden beneath his blood.

Then he stood straight up and kissed first her bad eye, then the good: a benediction in blood.

By the time he stood back, they were both trembling. Her knees buckled. He caught her elbows, letting her sink softly to the littered floor, flipping dead rats and glass aside until she sat in the sunshine on a tiny spot of clean carpet. Her chin bobbed. Her teeth chattered.

She looked up to see him holding the magnifying glass above her head.

She couldn't move, couldn't do anything.

Sunlight burst over her.

She stared up through shimmering fire and yellow dust. Diamond motes rained on her head, and a warm, golden fog entrapped her, bathing her in sudden peace and wonder.

The pain of her wounds faded and ceased. The agonizing tug of scar tissue eased to nothing. She looked down at her hands, and they were *identical*, pink and ivory, her skin glowing softly. She counted — five and five — ten fingers. Then five and five — *ten toes*.

The mist faded. The warmth of the sunlight, which had raised a fine dew on her skin, lifted. She looked up.

The huntsman smiled down at her. She raised a hand. He took it and tugged her into his arms, holding her like a long lost love.

Eventually, he carried her to the couch and settled her among pillows and cushions. He almost fainted there, but clenched his fists to stanch their bleeding. Standing, he stole her table doilies for bandages, then began tidying the apartment. Using certain of the small magnifying glasses that surrounded the larger one, he focused beams of light on the dead dragon, smashed beetle, bloody rats, shrews, and hacked wolf puppy, sending them elsewhere.

When he was done, he wrapped first his hands, then the magnifier, in fresh towels from the kitchen and gave her the magic glass to hold while he gathered the book from the hall floor.

The tome seemed totally undamaged, unscarred or marked. But when he closed it, she saw that its spine was a deep royal blue now, its face the color of the sky, with fairies flitting across it. She wondered if it even *was* a book, or only a bit of magic that could take whatever face it chose.

They made love that night and talked for long hours, learning to understand each other quite beyond language. She thought once, looking at her body, grown more perfect now, truer than this world had ever given it a chance to grow, that she owed Walter thanks. But he'd have to receive them from someone else, because he'd never touched her as her huntsman did — not before or after the accident — and had never bled his blood to save or heal her.

She stroked her lover's hair, stared into his beautiful eyes, and nodded assent. He smiled.

At dawn, they sat in the sunlight in front of her broken window, leafing through the book until they reached a meadow scene where minstrels strummed and piped, couples danced, and people feasted.

"Home," his mind said to hers.

"Home."

She bared the glass. He centered it just so over the picture and opened a tiny circle onto a bare spot of meadow. He went first. Pricking his finger and sticking it through the moon window, his whole body flowed into mist as if sucked by some great wind through the glass.

When she dared look, a man all in green had appeared on the page beneath the open window. His arms were raised.

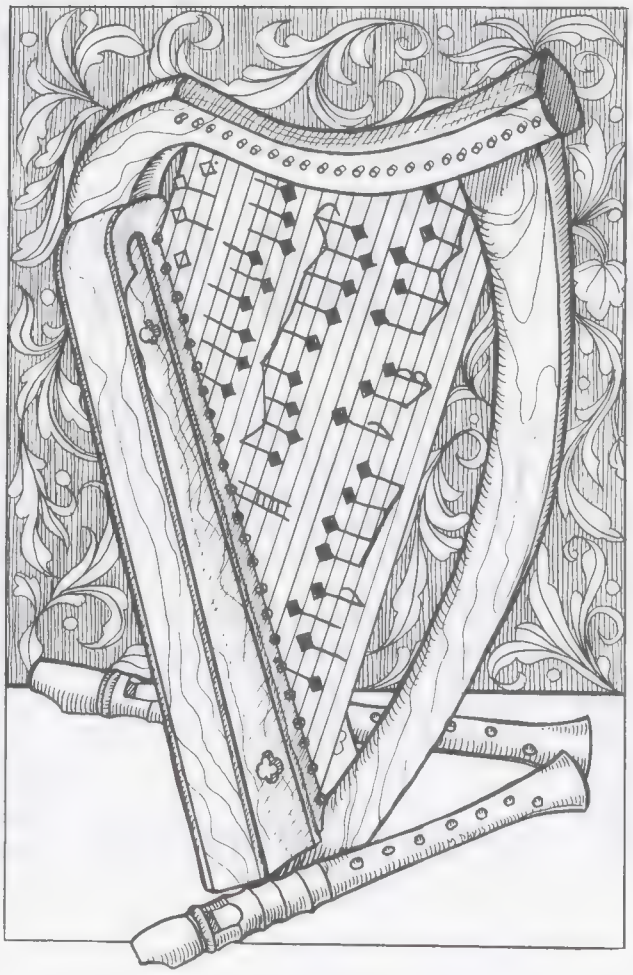
A moment's fear of the unknown made her hesitate. But there were no safe places any more — hadn't been any since the accident, when they died in her mind. She pricked her finger, moved the glass fractionally, and touched the man's tiny, upraised hand, following him into his world.

As she went, the glass, tied to her wrist by a woven strand of her own hair, turned itself inside out, faithfully accompanying its newest mistress.

❧

D. Lopes Heald lives in Carson City, Nevada. This is her first sale to Fantasy Magazine.

Alicia Austin's work is so well-known and well-loved by sf and fantasy fans that she has been asked to be Artist Guest of Honor at the 1993 World Science Fiction Convention, ConFrancisco, to be held Labor Day weekend in San Francisco. She and her business partner, Jinx Beers, run Fantasies Unlimited, a studio which publishes Alicia's cards, limited-edition prints, and other artwork. She's also become very popular recently as a Western artist!



Artwork by Margaret Davis

# Celtic Folk Music Sources

## by Tom Whitmore

Much of modern fantasy is based on Celtic sources. A lot of that is based on Celtic music. Novels like Emma Bull's **WAR FOR THE OAKS**, Gael Baudino's **GOSSAMER AXE**, and almost anything by Charles de Lint refer to and use traditional and modern versions of Celtic tunes and playing as a major element in the story. Who are the major musicians playing this music, where can you go to find copies of it, and who will tell you more about the important and obscure bands that perform it?

There are many major musical groups you can listen to. Any large record store should have a few albums by Alan Stivell (*Renaissance of the Celtic Harp* is a good starting place), Silly Wizard (their albums are all very accessible), Relativity, or the Chieftains. If you want to get into more traditional tunes, Grainne Yeats' 1980 Gael-Linn record, *The Belfast Harp Festival 1792* (Gael-Linn CEF 053/054, which was originally packaged with a small book), is two records of traditional harp music written down in 1792, and an excellent concert-style rendering of much beautiful music. Another good concert-style album is Charles Guard's *Avenging and Bright* (Shanachie 79014, recorded in 1977). If you want to get more involved with the dance-style music, Silly Wizard and the Tannehill Weavers play tunes (and songs) that will get your feet moving very rapidly.

If you're having trouble finding these albums in your area, several of the companies that make these records publish extensive catalogues with long descriptions. Shanachie Records (PO Box 208, Newton NJ 07860) and Green Linnet Records (43 Beaver Brook Road, Danbury CT 06810) both produce very nice catalogues and very nice recordings; Green Linnet tends more to the traditional, Shanachie to the modern in interpretation, but both do all sorts of music. There are several mail order dealers, but I've never ordered from any of them; I get most of what I need from a store called Down Home Music (10341 San Pablo Avenue, El Cerrito CA). Their mail order address is Suite L, 6921 Stockton Street, El Cerrito CA 94530, and their catalogue is huge. Another great catalogue is available from Alcazar Music, Box 429, Waterbury VT 05676. The people I've called have been very helpful with suggestions and advice.

If you already know something about the music and are interested in reaching out to find new bands, two magazines contain lots of reviews, interviews, and general information on Celtic and World Beat music. Dirty Linen grew out of a Fairport Convention fanzine, but now encompasses a lot of strange and interesting music. Their address is PO Box 66600. Baltimore MD 21239-6600, and a one-year sub (6 issues) is $20 in the United States. Charles de Lint writes reviews for them. The British equivalent is the monthly Folk Roots, 27 pounds (surface mail) per year from Southern Rag Ltd, PO Box 337, London N4 1TW, ENGLAND. Both are worth checking out, and include addresses of many dealers who will sell you records, instruments, and just about anything else that relates to this music.

This is a short introduction, just enough to get your feet wet. Soon you'll be finding bands like The Barely Works, and your friends will wonder what's gotten into your record collection. Then you'll have to share your finds with them! Someday you'll probably even start playing the music. Good luck, happy listening!

**Tom Whitmore** is one of three owners of The Other Change of Hobbit, a specialty sf and fantasy bookstore in Berkeley, a few blocks from the campus of the University of California. He's also a member of the Berkeley Morris dance team.

# THE GREAT WORLD and The Small

by Darrell Schweitzer

*I did not kill my brother.* In time, I hope we'll be able to joke about it, and say that for all fratricide is the most venerable of Roman traditions aside from, possibly, rape, I couldn't bring myself to emulate Romulus. My Remus survives yet. I never carried off any Sabine women either.

I remember telling him stories, more than anything else. That was how our childhood passed. Each summer the family would flee the heat of the City and seek refuge with grandfather, Serenus Falco, who had an estate in the north of Italy, in the foothills of the Julian Alps. Every night, all summer, Flavius and I slept in a broad, low room up under the tiled eaves. It was a spooky place, filled with ghosts, I was certain, but I was not afraid of them, and it was *there* that I could lie in the darkness listening to the wind among the mountain peaks, or to the secret conversations of the owls in nearby trees.

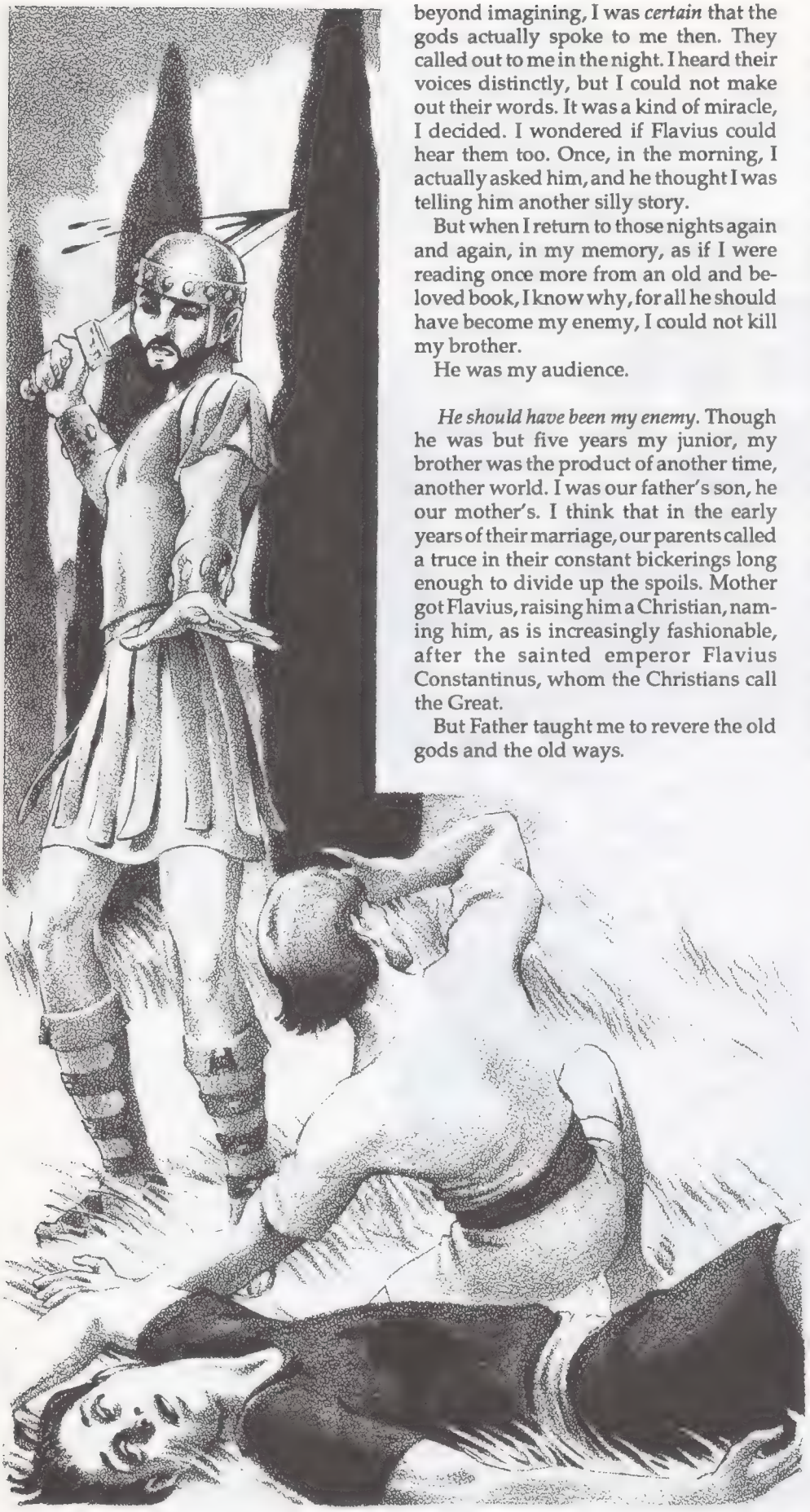
*There* I could well imagine that the world had never changed because everybody decided to worship a dead Jew, that the mysteries were still alive, that the gods still gazed down on us from Olympus, that the ancient heroes dwelt among the gods and looked down on us also, to inspire us to imitate mighty deeds.

*There.*

"It's time for a story," I would say, and sometimes my brother, when he was very young, would whimper, or when he was older protest, "No, that's wicked," or when he was older still, dismiss it as "pagan rubbish".

But he always listened, silently, more fascinated than he dared to admit to himself, even when the telling turned to monsters and restless shades of the wronged dead, and the terrible Strix

Artwork by George Barr



beyond imagining, I was *certain* that the gods actually spoke to me then. They called out to me in the night. I heard their voices distinctly, but I could not make out their words. It was a kind of miracle, I decided. I wondered if Flavius could hear them too. Once, in the morning, I actually asked him, and he thought I was telling him another silly story.

But when I return to those nights again and again, in my memory, as if I were reading once more from an old and beloved book, I know why, for all he should have become my enemy, I could not kill my brother.

He was my audience.

*He should have been my enemy.* Though he was but five years my junior, my brother was the product of another time, another world. I was our father's son, he our mother's. I think that in the early years of their marriage, our parents called a truce in their constant bickerings long enough to divide up the spoils. Mother got Flavius, raising him a Christian, naming him, as is increasingly fashionable, after the sainted emperor Flavius Constantinus, whom the Christians call the Great.

But Father taught me to revere the old gods and the old ways.

When my brother and I were boys, we fought like boys, made up, played, fought again, and the difference did not seem so great, but later, it became a chasm. We were torn apart even as the world is torn apart.

But first, we grew up. I put on the toga of manhood and tried to make a career as Father had, as our ancestors had all the way back to the days of the Republic: pleading cases, managing our estates, hunting, riding, hearing the complaints of tenants. I read old books and wrote poetry in the approved manner, which literary men said recalled the ancient masters. Soon I was to marry a girl of a lineage fully as venerable as my own. Father had arranged it.

Meanwhile, in the world beyond our immediate lives, Abrogastes, Master of Troops in the West, slew Valentinian Augustus and set up one Eugenius in his place. This Eugenius was the first emperor since Julian to worship the gods of Rome. He restored the altar of Victory in the Senate.

But he was also a usurper and the puppet of a murderer. His methods were those of his kind. He and his master swore they would turn the churches on the Vatican Hill into stables. Given time, they would have started heaving Christians to what few starving lions the circuses still possessed.

Yet Father went to serve the new regime. I remember how it was when the word reached our house.

Mother shrieked and wept. Flavius tried to comfort her. I had just come in from the law courts, and stood as still as one of the numberless commemorative statues in the Forum, trying to look dignified in my toga.

Father dragged me into the library, shut the door, checked to make sure no one was listening, then said to me, "It is time to join the great world, my son. It is the end of being small."

"But —"

"Despite everything, it is Rome's last chance. I am certain of that. Truly the last."

I was to act as if nothing had happened, and to deny all knowledge of his actions and preserve the family wealth if fate went against us. He made me swear a solemn oath to obey him. I protested that this was unnecessary. But his look was hard and fierce, as if he were animated by the spirit of some ancient hero. I tried to believe he was. I swore.

Then he gave me certain, other in-

structions. And so, in the summer of my eighteenth year, while the most Christian Theodosius Augustus marched from the East to do battle with Eugenius and the world awaited the outcome, I made my last trip to Grandfather Falco's. I rode on horseback, trailed by servants and a dozen pack mules laden with books and accounts and gifts. Behind them, Flavius lolled in a cart, prostrate with the heat.

When we got to Aquilea, the great city was filled with soldiers and with refugees from the coming battle. Smoke rose from sacrificial altars. Christian churches were closed. Flavius said the gods were devils and the stench of burning animals made him sick.

Ostensibly we were going to set our grandfather's affairs in order, since he was very old now, and his mind clouded. I tried to pretend it was nothing more than that. At night, I even told Flavius a few stories, for all he was in no mood to listen.

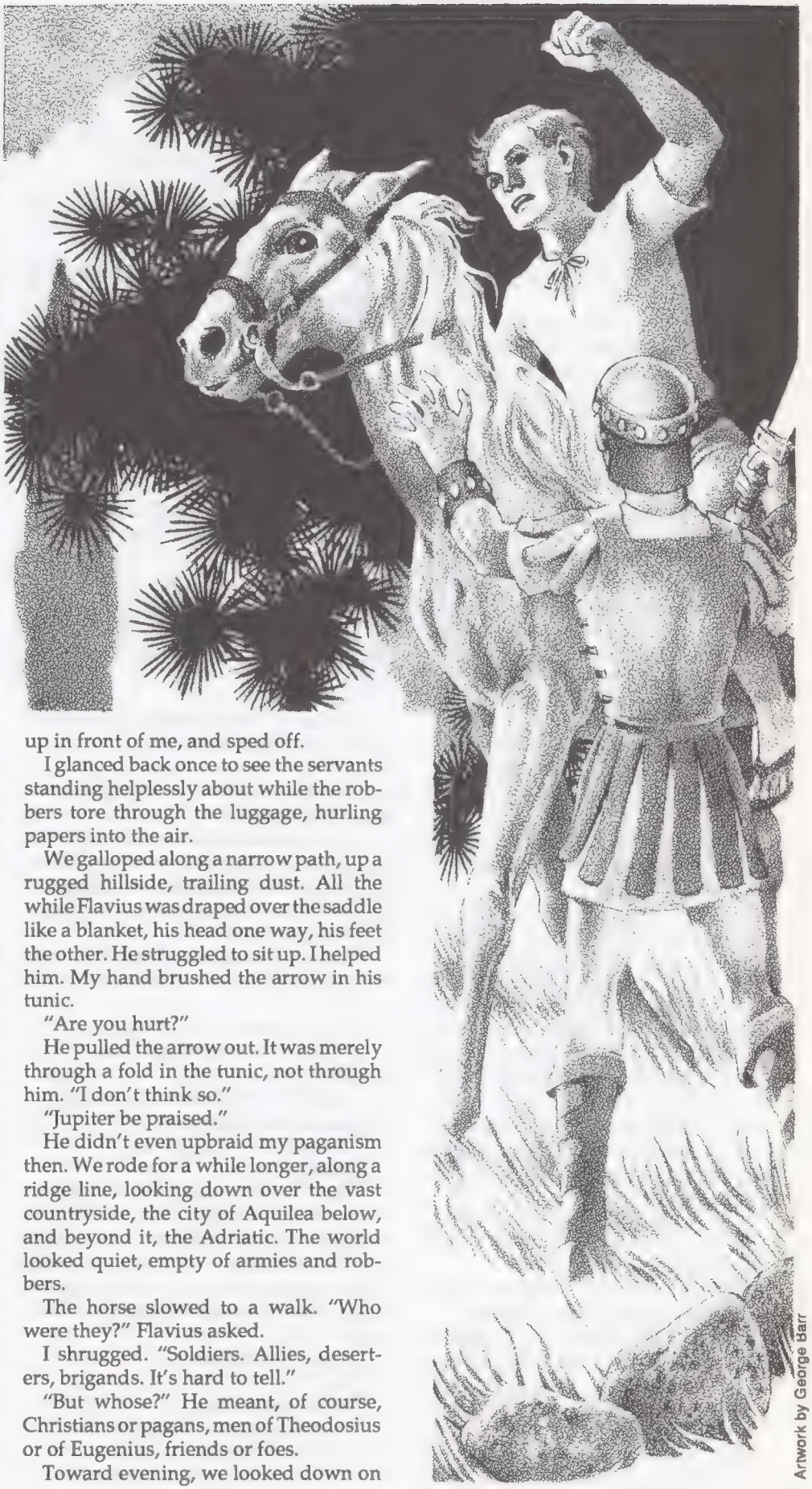
I hoped he would never find out that I bore letters for partisans of Eugenius. It was all we could do not to quarrel, since we'd both lived our lives weary of our parents quarrelling. But he was old enough to have his own ideas, and for me not to trust him.

*Somewhere north of Aquilea, the thing happened.*

We had been on the road most of the day, hours beyond the last inn or posting station, when suddenly the woods around us exploded with screaming men waving swords and spears. One grabbed my horse's bridle. I kicked him in the face and sent him tumbling. Flavius awoke with a shout, then started striking bravely on every side with a rake that happened to be in the cart with him. Once I saw him turn and stumble, and for a horrible second I thought he was transfixed with an arrow.

All was confusion, shouting. A servant screamed, his head cloven with an axe. The cart-horse reared up and the cart tipped over. Flavius went flying. Someone was on the horse behind me, but I shoved him off with a vicious jab of my elbow. A burly man in military armor went for my bridle again. I swerved away from him. He cursed in what sounded like German, drew his sword, slashed, missed.

I saw my brother struggling with three men who were trying to hold him down. One, my horse trampled. The other two rolled to either side. Flavius reached up with his hand. I caught him, hauled him up in front of me, and sped off.



I glanced back once to see the servants standing helplessly about while the robbers tore through the luggage, hurling papers into the air.

We galloped along a narrow path, up a rugged hillside, trailing dust. All the while Flavius was draped over the saddle like a blanket, his head one way, his feet the other. He struggled to sit up. I helped him. My hand brushed the arrow in his tunic.

"Are you hurt?"

He pulled the arrow out. It was merely through a fold in the tunic, not through him. "I don't think so."

"Jupiter be praised."

He didn't even upbraid my paganism then. We rode for a while longer, along a ridge line, looking down over the vast countryside, the city of Aquilea below, and beyond it, the Adriatic. The world looked quiet, empty of armies and robbers.

The horse slowed to a walk. "Who were they?" Flavius asked.

I shrugged. "Soldiers. Allies, deserters, brigands. It's hard to tell."

"But whose?" He meant, of course, Christians or pagans, men of Theodosius or of Eugenius, friends or foes.

Toward evening, we looked down on

Artwork by George Barr

Grandfather Falco's villa and farm, which seemed undisturbed, but was surrounded by hundreds of campfires.

"We can't go there," I said.

"They might be friends —"

"*Whose* friends?"

He saw the problem at once. For his age, I think he saw a great deal. But he didn't know what to say, and only managed a feeble, "I don't know."

"Besides, it wouldn't make any difference if they thought we had any money," I said.

So we turned away, walking down, Flavius leading the horse. There was nothing to do but find a secluded spot and camp for the night. In time we came to a little hollow, where water trickled among some boulders.

But we did not dare make a fire. Instead, we sat still beneath the trees, listening to the wind, gazing up at the darkening sky.

"Titus, what is going to happen to us?" my brother asked, and for a minute he sounded like a frightened child. It seemed as if the years were as nothing, and we were in the loft again, and it was time for a story.

But Flavius interrupted. "We should be enemies," he said.

I stared at him, startled. "Why?"

"Because we're on different sides. Of everything. You know perfectly well."

Unconsciously, I fingered the letters, which I wore in a sealed packet around my neck.

"What do I know perfectly well?"

He was staring at me. As inconspicuously as I could, I withdrew my hand. But he lunged at me suddenly, and the two of us wrestled like small boys, rolling over the ground, startling our horse, while he shouted, "Give it, you bastard!" I dug my hand into his face and shoved him away with a mighty heave, but he had hold of the letters. The string broke. He tumbled backward, clutching his prize, then stood up, tore the packet open, and tried to read.

I tackled him. We rolled again. I got the letters back as he wriggled, tried to kick me in the face, and broke free.

We sat in the dust, panting, our clothing in ruins, glaring at one another. I'd scraped my knee painfully. But I held the letters. He had produced a dagger from somewhere.

"Now what are you going to do?" I said. "Kill me?"

"Or you me?"

"It would make a certain amount of sense."

"You're a traitor, Titus. You and Father both."

"Shut up. You don't know what you're talking about."

But he did. "Those men. They weren't robbers. They were looking for —" He pointed to the letters.

"Yes, they were. But they let us get away. Not very competent, were they?"

"They let *you* get away —"

"Do you think they would have treated you any differently?"

"It wasn't my fault —" There was nothing to argue about. I felt a sinking, helpless feeling. I cursed Father for meddling in the affairs of the great world. I was losing my brother. Now it was all coming out, like a long-festering poison.

"Consider," I said after a while. "We are both Romans, and the soldiers on both sides are virtually all barbarians. Not one in a hundred speaks decent Latin."

"So?"

"That must count for something. Family must count for a lot more. Our lands, our ancestors, everything. So let us not be enemies, all right?" I held out my hand.

He clutched the dagger and drew back. "You're trying to trick me!"

*I should have killed him right then and there. Logic dictated it.*

A long, difficult silence followed. The sky became fully dark, moonless, filled with stars. Around us, the owls began to speak. Flavius sat very still, his face an inscrutable mask.

After a very long time he asked, in the tone of a child again, "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I think I should pray for you."

"That's a start."

But he did not. He sat still, listening to the sounds of the night.

"Do you hear them?" I said.

"What?"

"The voices of the gods. I heard them many times on nights like this. Sometimes when I went downstairs to piss, I'd look out a window, and see the gods up in the sky, huge as clouds, standing far away, with the stars like jewels in their cloaks."

"You were dreaming."

"No."

"It was clouds then."

"No. They spoke to me quite clearly, and said that because I still believed, I could call on them when I needed them the most, and they would answer —"

"What a crock of —"

"It wasn't the wind," I said. "I heard them."

Again silence settled between us, and I listened for the voices of the gods in the night. Surely on this night, I told myself, surely now as the world hung in the balance, they would speak.

*I* was the one who began to pray, *"Mother Hecate, mistress of night, goddess of graves —"*

"Stop that!" Flavius hissed. "It's devilish!" He made the old sign to ward off evil, not the Christian one.

"I think it is time for a story," I said. "Will you listen?"

He said nothing at all, so I began my story, telling of two brothers who were lost in the woods, and how the spirits of the old gods gathered around them to hear one of them tell a story.

"I think I *know* this story," my brother said with heavy irony.

"No you don't. Let it continue." All around us, the owls cried out.

In the story the brothers rose from where they sat and ran through the night, hand in hand, because one of them heard a voice calling out to him clearly, while the other, the younger, did not. The elder dragged the younger along, and the boy fought with him, and was afraid, but had lost his dagger somewhere.

In the story, he said I was bewitched, that the devil had me.

*I did not kill him. I came to a cliff's edge and could have easily hurled him off.*

Here a tree, there a stone. Again, the bending path. I knew the signs like something long remembered, like an old story, and the voices of the owls led me on, and shadows among the trees: a face like a man, a form not at all human.

In the story, in the story as I told it, the two of us crawled on all fours up steep hillsides, beneath thickets of thorns, until we came to a strange country where the very earth seemed transformed into crumbly ash, and the sky was black but there were no stars, and all the noises of the night were gone but for the voices of the thousand owls, which flew above us, invisible.

A single, black bird fluttered before my face; not an owl, and I saw its own face clearly: a woman's, with streaming black hair and snow-pale skin, eyes black and blind like a basalt statue.

It shrieked at me. Flavius cried out, stumbled. I caught hold of his wrist, yanked, dragged him on.

To this day I do not know if what followed was some kind of dream or an actuality, or if the distinction means anything.

Think of it as a vision. We came to a ruined temple in a valley between two hills, beneath a starless sky that was utterly dark. The owls had deserted us, and we approached the fallen columns and roofless enclosure in absolute silence.

Flames burned noiselessly in a great, bronze bowl set on a tripod. In the firelight, amid flickering shadows, I saw shrivelled corpses in heaps, and scattered bones, and great ravens rooting through the debris like robbers. My brother and I waded among them, but were not molested as they tore at the bones through fragments of fine garments, scattering jewels, scepters, diadems. Somewhere, Flavius babbled words in a whispering delirium.

At least one corpse had an animal's head, a dog, I think.

Then bones and tatters rose up before me, assembling themselves into the shape of a woman with wild black hair, her face streaked with blood, her eyes black as a statue and blind.

She groped for Flavius and caught him, quick as a striking serpent, hurling him to the ground, kneeling astride him, holding his arms down with her clawed hands. She rocked her head from side to side and hissed.

I saw that her teeth were like needles. Strix. Devourer of children. Desperate, famished, mad.

My brother's eyes met mine. "Help me," he said. I think he wanted to say more, but couldn't find the words. I think he wanted to say that I had brought him here deliberately, to kill him.

But I turned suddenly, looking about for a weapon. I found a staff of some sort, picked it up, struck at the monster, then stumbled with the unspent force of the blow as the staff went right through the creature as if it were made of smoke.

Flavius let out a little cry. I called on the gods then. I named them, great Jupiter, Apollo, Mercury, as many as I could think of.

Because in one of my stories there was a boy who spoke with the gods, and to whom the gods spoke. They promised to come if he called.

The temple filled with wind. Dust rose. The feasting ravens flapped their wings irritably.

In the far darkness, in the back of the temple, there was a light, like a candle before the face of a huge, seated statue. But the face turned toward me and opened its terrible eyes, and said, "She would have your brother's life. It will do her no good. We are all dying anyway."

"Stop her!" Even then the black hag seemed to kiss Flavius on the side of the neck.

"Stop her!"

"I have no power left to stop her. Speak to her, Titus Serenus. Remind her who she once is."

"But — but — is she not the Strix?"

"No. Not always."

I thought I understood then, in my amazement, and if I can ever be called brave, if I ever can claim to have performed a heroic deed, it was this: I took the crone by the hand. She looked up at me, blood streaming over her chin. I spoke to her gently, my voice trembling, but I did not lose my words.

"Dread Mother of Darkness, I am honored to greet you at last."

She rose. I crouched down and helped Flavius to his feet. He leaned on my shoulder.

Together, he and I approached the seated one, and I saw a diademed figure clad in military garb like an emperor, larger than a man, mighty of limb, but the face was filled with pain and weariness. A spear had pierced the right side. Blood pooled before the throne.

I knelt and gathered the blood into my hands and poured it out again, as an offering to Death.

"Do you not know me?" The voice was like muted thunder.

"Yes, Lord, I do."

Flavius also knelt and dipped his fingers into the blood.

And all around us, the shadows shifted, and figures stepped out from behind the broken pillars. I saw them all, in their tattered clothing and tarnished crowns, in all their aspects and personas, those who were human in form and those who were not — the great ones, more perfect in shape than any mortal, and another, whose head was that of a startled bird, and another, green and clad in leaves — all of them feeble with age and neglect, truly, as their king had said, dying.

I cried out then, and fell prostrate, for I could no longer doubt that I was in the presence of the very gods who had made Rome a colossus, who granted immortality to heroes or smote them. The true gods, revealed to me, who was no one in particular, who was merely fond of telling stories in the dark.

I wept. The seated one leaned down and touched me on the shoulder. His touch burned, but very slightly.

"Get up," he said. "We are all waiting for you."

They were my audience. The ruined temple rustled with the wind of their voices. Dust stirred, rose, settled, rose

Artwork by George Barr

again. I could not make out any words. At times they seemed to be laughing, at times weeping. At times it was like the soft chatter of pigeons under the eaves at Grandfather Falco's.

Then they all fell silent, and I was commanded to begin. I sat where I was, in the middle of the floor, and spoke haltingly, urged on whenever I could no longer find the words; all the while amazed that anyone would want to listen to a stuttering schoolboy who had forgotten his lessons and could only mangle Hesiod and Homer and Vergil. I felt like a boy again, like I was ten years old and had slipped down from the loft to relieve myself and looked out the window and saw, or imagined I saw, the gods in the night sky.

But it didn't seem to matter. After a while I came to understand that my listeners did not care at all about the quality of my delivery. They merely wanted to be reminded of old events. I think they merely wanted to hear the names.

Much to my surprise, my brother's voice joined my own. He crouched beside me, his face drawn, his expression bewildered, but he spoke gently, and together we told of Proserpine and of the passion of Demeter, of Orpheus and his descent into the nether world; only we left the ending off that particular story and made it seem as if the poet had found his beloved among the shades and been content to remain with her.

The lady who had been the Strix and before that a goddess sank down into sleep, into the darkness, bones rattling as they scattered across the floor.

*"That was well done, for both of you."*

I looked up.

"Come closer. I cannot rise." And the dying god pulled the spear out of his side with a grunt, and his blood splashed over me, burning. It poured into my cupped hands, and for an instant it seemed I held a magic glass of some kind. Through it I gazed down as if from a great height on two armies in desperate combat. The place was the gorge where the river Frigidus cuts through the mountains above Aquilea. I saw a black-bearded, red-faced man riding furiously through a forest, up a steep hillside. His horse stumbled, broke a leg, threw him; but he continued on with three or four followers, all on foot, all of them at the absolute limit of endurance.

I knew this to be the murder-soiled traitor Abrogastes, who had promised to restore the old gods. Trapped at last in a cave, he clasped his friends to him one by one, then released them, muttered something, and fell on his sword.

The man who stood beside him, who steadied him as he fell, was my father.

I let the pooled blood drip out between my fingers. The image was gone.

"Why have you shown me this?" I said at last.

"I cannot tell. There must be a reason. I do not know it any more."

When the god spoke no more, I knew he was dead. Even as I watched, the divine flesh sublimated away, rising like golden smoke. Bones poured out of the throne in a heap. Faint lightning flickered once or twice, and then there was absolute darkness in which Flavius groped his way to me and held me tight, his face against my chest.

He said something very strange: "What have I become?"

"You haven't changed at all. You're still my brother." I think I had fathomed the final mystery then. I was to be a witness to the end of the great world. Only the small remained. We were to go on with our lives.

Flavius shook me awake that morning. We were still in the hollow, among mossy boulders. The horse grazed nearby.

"You've burned your hands," he said.

I looked at them dumbly. "They must have fallen into the fire."

"But we didn't make a fire." He turned his head to one side, wincing with pain. "Ow. I think a scorpion stung me."

"Do you know what happened, Flavius?"

"I had some kind of...dream. It was horrible at first. But in the end I was no longer afraid, and I dreamed of the angels."

*"Really?"*

He glared at me, but his fury faded into a kind of disoriented exhaustion. I didn't try to argue. I let him lead me to a stream. The cool water felt good on my hands.

*I did not kill my brother. It wouldn't have mattered if I had. Not in the end.*

In the end, the soldiers of Abrogastes went over to Theodosius and the Christians won the battle. Father vanished on the field or nearby. His body was never found.

But our family was spared, perhaps because as soon as Flavius and I reached Grandfather Falco's house I went straight to the kitchen and burned the letters in the oven.

My brother is not my enemy. That is all the consolation I have. If we had fought, if one of us had killed the other over the affairs of the great world, what difference would it have made, to Abrogastes and Eugenius, to Theodosius, or to the gods?

Father once told me that we are like barnacles on the hull of a ship, and the ship is the great world of Caesars and empires and gods. We live in our own small world where what matters is more a matter of the hailstorm that flattened the crops and whether or not your belly is full. The events of the great world are as remote as the thoughts of the ship's captain to the barnacles.

"But what if the ship is wrecked?" I asked.

"Then we cling to some fragment large enough that we won't notice the difference."

"Do you believe we can?"

"No," he said.

The ship was wrecked a few years later. Those same Goths who fought for Theodosius at Aquilea turned on the empire. On their way to Rome they ransacked Grandfather Falco's estate. He met them at the door, sword in hand, on his head the old helmet he hadn't worn in fifty years. A Goth laughed and ran him through with a spear.

The barbarians left the Queen of Cities a hollow shell. Now, though the Roman corpse may still be seated on the throne of the world, it is truly dead, its heart torn out, its limbs rotting in the sun.

I think of the old Stoic epitaph: *I did not exist. I existed. I do not exist. I care not.* So it is with all things, even the world, even the gods.

So it is in the great world, and in the small.

❧

DARRELL SCHWEITZER is an editor at *Weird Tales*, a noted interviewer of sf figures, and a writer of numerous short stories (some of them even in *FANTASY Magazine*), including recent sales to *Fear* (a British publication), *Fantasy Tales*, and to J.N. Williamson for an anthology, **MASQUES IV**. He was a World Fantasy Award judge in 1991 and is working on a novel called **THE MASK OF HIS FLESH**, about a multiple-personality sorcerer.

GEORGE BARR made his first professional art sale in 1960. He lives in San Jose, CA, and has been providing illustrations for FANTASY Magazine since its first issue. He won the Hugo as Best Fan artist in 1968 and has been nominated in both Fan Artist and Professional Artist categories.

# The Last Word

No Cauldron results last issue. None this issue, either. Two different reasons. This time, since issue #17 hasn't been out very long, not a lot of results have reached us yet, so issue #19 will have Cauldron results from #17 and #18. (Aren't there a lot of great stories this issue?)

But we had a real problem with the voting for issue #16, so we have simply decided there will be no awards. Not one, but *two* of the authors circulated a photocopied ballot and had their friends mail it to us. Now, we encourage you to get your friends to read your story, but if they want to vote for us, they have to send in their own ballots or letters. When Raul Reyes, who tallies the votes, told me about the problem and showed me the questionable ballots, we had several discussions and later a meeting of the whole staff: what to do? Count one of each photocopied set and ignore the rest? The Jennifer Roberson story was the clear winner in that case; I believe the Sandra Morresse story was second. What if the copied ballots voted for different artists? If you threw out the author votes, should you count the artist votes anyway? It was a real tangle. So the simplest thing seemed to throw out the election. If you think we should hold a re-vote, let me know, but I think by now most people have forgotten what were the good stories in an issue which came out, after all, last summer.

It's a shame, because Marion and I normally use the results to help us decide which authors to buy more stories from and to see which artists are popular with our readers. In fact, my choice of Alan Gutierrez for the cover of #16 was due in part to his taking first place in the Cauldron voting for an earlier issue. And I'm sorry that the real winners will never know for certain who they are, never experience the pride they deserve to feel for their work.

We have an incredibly beautiful cover coming up, with artwork by Janny Wurts. We'll have the issue out at NorWesCon in Seattle at the end of March (so nice of them to throw a birthday party for me!), where Janny is Artist Guest of Honor. I got to know Janny a little better at last fall's World Fantasy Convention: this talented woman not only is a first class painter *and* a first class writer *and* an excellent horsewoman, she also raises baby squirrels for her local humane society whenever they have orphans to care for (during the day she feeds them and then, while she works at her computer or drawing table, she puts them into her shirt pockets where they sleep quietly until they get hungry again). She'll probably kill me for telling you.

Next fall we have a cover from Alicia Austin, right after she is Artist Guest of Honor for the WorldCon in San Francisco.

Future cover stories will be coming from Misty Lackey and from Mike Resnick, to mention a few of the writers who have promised us their work. We have stories from Barbara Rosen, Patricia Duffy Novak, Lynn Coulter, and others, some familiar to you, some brand new. We hope you'll stick around and read 'em all!

— *Rachel E. Holmen*

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| Laura J. Underwood - The Black Tower | ❑ | James Balkovek | ❑ |
| Steve Cooke - Who's Been Sleeping In My Bed? | ❑ | Merle Insinga | ❑ |
| Patricia Duffy Novak - The Witch's Child | ❑ | Barb Armata | ❑ |
| eluki bes shahar - Queeneyes | ❑ | Sandra Templeton | ❑ |
| Lynn Coulter - The Dream Web | ❑ | Dameon Willich | ❑ |
| Barbara Stevens Graybeal - The Goddess Who Dreamed of Pomegranates | ❑ | Margaret Organ-Kean | ❑ |
| B.V. Larson - Death Test | ❑ | Gail Butler | ❑ |
| Parke Godwin - A Spell For Annalise | ❑ | Lynne T. Fahnestalk | ❑ |
| D. Lopes Heald - Glasswings | ❑ | Alicia Austin | ❑ |
| Darrell Schweitzer - The Great World and The Small | ❑ | George Barr | ❑ |



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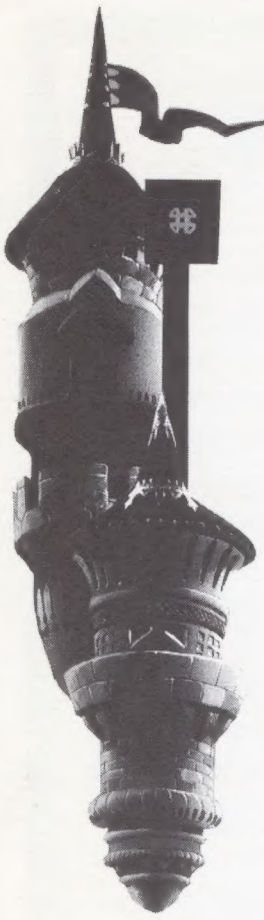

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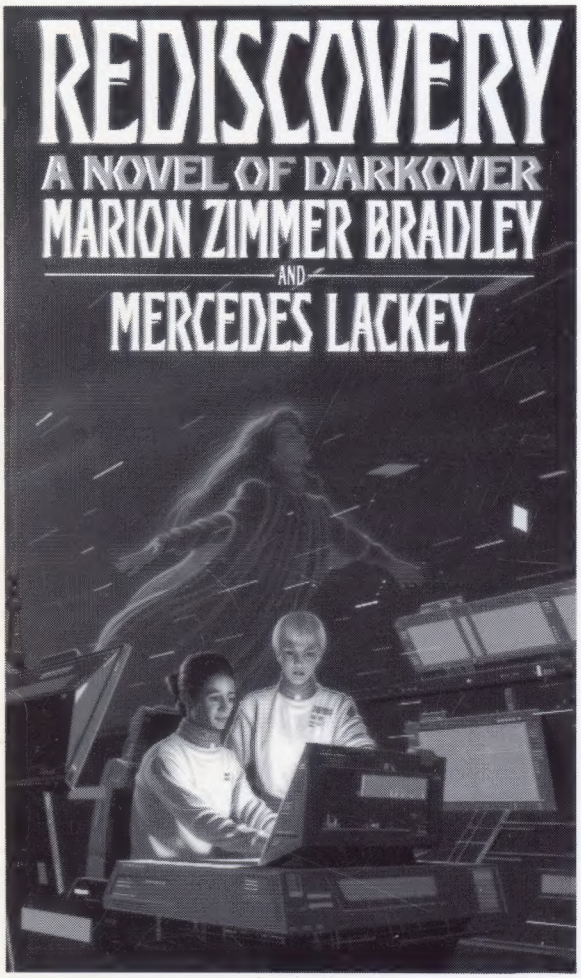


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